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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Passion's
Lasting Promise

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A REGENCY CASTLE ROMANCE

AMANDA MARIEL

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Foreword

Amidst the haunting ruins of Almerry Castle, Captain Camden Beauchamp, scarred by the trials of Waterloo, finds his world intertwined with that of Rebecca Summerville—a woman with an indomitable spirit and a haunted past. As their souls collide within the ancient walls, they must confront their shared history and discover whether love's enduring legacy can heal the wounds of war.

One



Northumberland, Summer, 1815

Lady Rebecca Sumerville could scarcely believe her eyes. Her gaze was fixated on the faint flicker of light coming from Almerry Castle, like a beckoning siren, dancing within the slender lancet windows of the second-story entry hall. She couldn't contain her astonishment and whispered to her twin sister in hushed urgency, "Phoebe, do you see that?"

"See what? And why are you whispering?" Her sister slanted a curious stare at her.

Why indeed? Rebecca hesitated. Perhaps it was the fear that any abrupt sound might scare the mysterious light away that compelled her to whisper. With a reluctant glance away from the castle, she turned her gaze to her sister and said, "Over there," pointing at Almerry with trembling fingers, "the light." Her heart sank as she looked back at the castle, now barely visible against the night sky, only to find the mesmerizing glow had inexplicably vanished.

"I see nothing." Phoebe shook her head, chestnut curls flouncing about her neck and face.

"It was there. I saw it. A flickering glow coming from the lancet windows." Rebecca turned, her green eyes fixed on Almerry Castle, yearning to witness the elusive flickering glow once more. She frowned, a sudden unease gripped her, and she pressed a trembling hand to her abdomen.

Her family's Northumberland estate bordered the ancient stone castle on the opposite side of a small creek. In the light of day, the castle's imposing silhouette was clearly visible from their home. Throughout her life, Rebecca had spent countless hours gazing at the formidable keep, letting her imagination roam free, weaving stories within its ancient walls.

The great keep peeked out from behind high walls, encasing the sandstone structure. She'd snuck over to the castle on more than one occasion, though she'd never entered its walls. Most frequently, she strolled around the outer wall, studying the stone. On some occasions, she'd sat near the postern gate. Each time she laid eyes on Almerry, she created tales in her mind about the castle and its legendary occupants.

According to local lore, no one had lived there for hundreds of years. Not since Sir Ariston Beauchamp and his beloved Lady Isabel Staunton passed away. Rebecca imagined what the couple must have lived like and spun her own stories about their life and love.

Phoebe laced an arm through hers. "Let us return to the party."

Rebecca smiled at her sister. "Not just yet. I want to watch for the light to return. What do you suppose caused it?"

"I don't know. Mayhap it was your imagination." Phoebe tugged on Rebecca's arm. "Come on, before Mother sends a search party to look for us."

Rebecca's chest tightened as she stared back at the castle. Had she imagined the flickering glow? She didn't think so.

Phoebe tugged again, pulling Rebecca forward. "Please be sensible. Even if you saw a light, it was likely just the moon's glow. There is nothing to be gained by remaining here. Let us return now."

She supposed her sister was right. By now, mother had surely noted their absence. Should they dally much longer, they'd earn her scorn. After all, tonight was about them. Mother had gone to great efforts to arrange the house party.

She'd invited the most sought-after families along with their bachelor sons, hoping to make a match for at least one of her eligible daughters. She'd have their hides if she took notice of their absence.

"If we must." Sighing, Rebecca followed Phoebe toward the house. "Though I do find this party rather tedious."

Phoebe squeezed her elbow. "Come now, it is not all that bad."

"Perhaps not for you." Rebecca grinned. "Which gentleman has your fancy?"

"Do not tease me." Phoebe swatted Rebecca with her fan.

The quartet's music drifted from the house as they drew closer. Light spilled out onto the lawn, casting the front gardens in a glow. Rebecca reached for Phoebe's dance card. "Shall we see who awaits you, dear?" She flicked her mischievous hazel gaze over it. "Lord Owens claimed two dances. Might I find you as Lady Owens before the summer quits us?"

Phoebe jerked her wrist away. "Stop jesting. I do not find you at all amusing."

With their arms hooked together, they reentered the ballroom. Noting the light flush upon her sister's cheeks, Rebecca stifled a laugh. "Very well, if you insist."

Phoebe released Rebecca's arm. "Here he comes now."

Lord Owens strolled toward them, his eyes sparkling. He did not wear his soldier's uniform as he had on previous occasions, but a pang of upset raced through Rebecca all the same. How could Phoebe have designs on such a man after what had happened to their brother? "Does it not bother you that he is a soldier, Phoebe?"

"No, and do hush. He might hear you and take offense."

Rebecca looked around the crowded room. "I'm certain he cannot."

"No matter. I find Lord Owens and all the other soldiers to be quite honorable. They are heroes. We should be happy to

dance with any one of them.”

“A dance could lead to more and more could lead to heartache. I shall not, will not, do that to myself.”

“Do not be so harsh,” Phoebe said.

It wasn't that Rebecca disliked soldiers. She simply could not abide putting herself through more unnecessary heartache. Her brother, like all soldier's had been brave if not foolish and his death still caused her pain—it always would.

“There is nothing heroic about death and chaos.” Rebecca glanced at her twin, noting the sparkle dancing in her eyes.

For an instant, a pang of envy struck her. Despite being twins, Rebecca had always thought Phoebe was much prettier. She took after their mother, nearly a head shorter, with the kind of build that made gentlemen naturally protective. Her hazel eyes suited her thick chestnut locks. Rebecca, on the other hand, resembled their father, too tall to be fashionable, with straight blonde hair she could never get to hold a curl.

“Nonsense.” Phoebe stepped away to join Lord Owens before Rebecca could say more. Not that her stubborn sister would listen, anyway. What a ninny to so happily offer herself up to heartbreak and abandonment!

Well, not Rebecca. She'd had all she was willing to take of war and soldiers. She'd not be made a widow at the end of some enemy's weapon. Life would not find her as it had her sister-in-law, Daphne. The poor lady was barely wed to Rebecca's brother long enough to be with child when Roland was called away to fight. Now she found herself a widow raising a wee one without a father, all because her husband had chosen to purchase a commission in the British Army.

Pushing the dreadful memory aside, she fanned herself while she moved through the crush of people toward the refreshment table. Between the guests crowded into the room and the warm summer temperatures, the ball had become quite stifling. Humidity caused sweat to form at the back of Rebecca's neck where her hair was gathered in a chignon.

Someone rested a hand on her shoulder, stopping her halfway to the refreshment table.

“Rebecca darling, I’d like to introduce you to Lord Fredrickson.”

Drat. So much for avoiding mother’s matchmaking. Rebecca ground her teeth before turning to face mother with a fake grin pasted onto her lips. Mother smiled back with mischief dancing in her hazel gaze.

Rebecca nodded stiffly at the tall man beside Mother. He was well built, with broad shoulders and a sturdy frame. She had to admit he was rather dashing. His black hair, with a hint of grey at the temples, shone in the candlelight while his brown eyes reflected warmth.

Nonetheless, he was not for her.

“Lord Fredrickson served with Roland in the second regiment and has just returned from Waterloo.” Mother glanced up at the gentleman, admiration shining in her gaze.

“How fortunate.” Rebecca let the smile fall from her lips. “Did you know my brother well? Roland was not so lucky as you, my lord. He is never to return to us.”

Mother inhaled sharply. “Rebecca.”

Lord Fredrickson’s mouth pulled into a wince at Rebecca’s words. “I am terribly sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, my lord.” She turned to her mother. “I fear I have come down with a headache. Might I retire to my rooms?”

Mother touched a gloved hand to Rebecca’s brow. “Very well, darling. I’ll send a maid up with something to soothe the ache.”

“Thank you, Mother.” Rebecca offered Lord Fredrickson a curt nod, then took her leave. Her head did not truly throb, but she’d found herself desperate to escape the crush. She simply said the first thing that came to mind.

Thank heavens it worked.

Phoebe stepped in front of her just as she reached the door leading from the crowded ballroom. “Where are you off to now?”

“I have a headache.” Rebecca forced herself to ignore the inclination to avert her gaze.

Phoebe narrowed her eyes. “No, you don’t. Tell me you are not planning to sneak off to Almerry.”

“Of course not. I simply cannot tolerate one more moment of this ball. I’m going to bed.”

“You can’t fool me. I know you’re considering a trek to the castle. At least wait for the morrow.”

Phoebe knew Rebecca well. It would do her no good to argue over her intentions, as her sister would see right through whatever Rebecca said. “I considered it, but have changed my mind.”

“What a relief.” Phoebe grinned. “Might you reconsider your stance on mother’s party as well? If you would allow yourself to have some fun, you might find it tolerable, after all. There are many gentlemen here who did not fight in the war.”

Rebecca shook her head. “I am well aware of who is in attendance. Please let me pass.”

Phoebe moved aside, calling after Rebecca as she mounted the staircase. “It will be a long week if you insist on avoiding the festivities.”

Rebecca only quickened her pace. Long week indeed. This was but the second day of her mother’s house party. The festivities were planned to last a fortnight. The family knew Mother intended to find husbands for Rebecca and Phoebe, but the guests were under the impression the party was to celebrate the end of the war. Rebecca supposed that’s why Mother invited so many soldiers to join. Just about everyone of importance who had served was present, along with many titled families with their bachelor sons in tow.

None of the gentlemen interested her, least of all the war heroes. Sure, there were many handsome, desirable gentlemen in attendance, but looks and titles held no sway with her.

When she married, if she married, it would be for love, not some match arranged by her mother, or anyone else. Her heart would do the choosing.

After lighting a lantern, she settled onto the window seat in her room. She loved sitting on the plush velvet surface while she read or stared at the castle. Rebecca set her lantern down and peered out the window, searching through the dark veil of night for the shadowed outline of Almerry.

Ah, there it was, a barely visible monument in the moonlight. Legend had it Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel shared a love so great that not even death could separate them. It was said they remained at Almerry together to this day, and when the night was still, you could hear them calling to each other across the castle lands. She wanted a love like theirs. A love so strong not even the finality of death could break its bonds.

“My lady.”

Rebecca glanced toward the door. Her maid stood at the entrance with a tray in her hands.

“Your mother sent up a tonic.” The maid crossed the room and placed the tray near Rebecca.

“Thank you.” She managed a weak smile. “I do not wish to be disturbed tonight. You may pick up the tray in the morning.”

“Yes, my lady.” The maid curtsied, then departed.

Rebecca turned back to the window and leaned her forehead against the glass. Despite the warmth of the summer night, the leaded glass felt cool against her skin. She sighed, staring back at the keep. What caused the flickers of light she’d seen earlier? Had someone been inside the ruins? Or had she imagined it as Phoebe suggested?

Her pulse increased as the light caught her eye again—bigger, brighter—a flickering beacon against the blackness of night. This time the glow appeared to be coming from higher in the keep. A smile stretched across her face. She’d not imagined a thing. Someone, or something, was in the castle.

She narrowed her gaze, hoping to see more clearly. The light glowed behind the lancet windows of the massive stone structure. It looked as if someone had built a fire in one of the rooms. Who would dare to enter the castle? She could not imagine, but someone had to be in there. Every fiber of her being called for her to go catch the intruder.

She stood, strolling halfway across her room before stilling. No. She couldn't. She'd given Phoebe her word, and she'd not go back on it.

Leastwise, not tonight.

Two



C amden Beauchamp strolled across the large bailey, stretching his stiff muscles. He peered through the thick blanket of fog clinging to the castle grounds, then massaged his stiff neck as he headed for the stable.

The medieval stone floor he'd slept on left him sore all over. He'd arrived at Almerry late last evening, sadly ill-prepared for what he found. What the devil had he been thinking, arriving at an abandoned castle alone, and at night?

Once Wellington released him from duty, he dismissed those in his charge and set out for a quiet place to clear his head. Though he loved his family, he found himself reluctant to return home straightaway. Not that he regretted his part in the war or his duties as a soldier. He took pride in his accomplishments.

All the same, the war had left him weary and in much need of solitude. He longed for time to himself to make peace with all he had seen and done. The war was still close in his heart—there was no denying it—but something about this castle filled him with hope that perhaps, just perhaps, he could find peace once more.

He glanced around the bailey, focusing through the eerie fog. Leastwise, no one was likely to bother him here. The castle lay in ruins from years of neglect. Its inner wall had been reduced in size by plundering villagers a hundred or so years before. The once grand gatehouse appeared more like a shell, its enormous gates rotted away long ago. Most of the

outbuildings had been taken apart, their stones either carried away or scattered across the bailey.

He trailed his gaze across the grounds from the stable to the keep. They still held their shape but also suffered damage from the years of neglect. Most of the wood within the stable had rotted away, though the stone walls held strong. The keep was mostly intact, other than the partially caved in roof making the fifth floor uninhabitable.

Camden had inherited the castle from his uncle upon his death. It had been passed down through his family for centuries, though no one ever bothered to make use of it. According to his father, no one had lived here since the thirteenth century. Almerry had long ago been stripped of most of its furnishings, only a few moth eaten tapestries and broken pieces of furniture lingered.

A chill tickled his spine as he glanced from the gatehouse to the postern gate, paying mind to all things in-between. Considering the once grand castle's current condition, it was no wonder people believed the spirits of his ancestors haunted the place.

Almerry had been abandoned after the deaths of his ancestors, Sir Ariston Beauchamp and Lady Isabel Staunton-Beauchamp, not even a hundred years after it had been built. So far as Camden knew, he was the first to slumber here since. Family legend held that no one could stand the idea of disturbing their spirits and so they allowed the castle to fall into ill-repair.

Camden turned toward the stables, then stepped into the dark interior. He stopped behind a large stall. Closing his eyes, he inhaled deeply, savoring the dust-filled air mingled with spices of hay and leather. Mayhap he should consider having the old pile of stones restored and making it his permanent home. A quiet life in the country did hold some appeal. At the least, he would be able to avoid the pressures of London.

He made his way to a stall at the end of the row, where his stallion whinnied. The horse nudged Camden's arm with his strong head. "Hey there." Camden reached up to stroke the

beast's muscled neck. "How about I move these stones so we can get you out and go find some oats?" The horse stepped back, nodding its head and neighing with approval.

Camden would need to gather some wood to repair the rotted stall door along with hay, oats, straw, and commodities for himself. At least a few laborers to help make the repairs would be needed as well, and perhaps a house servant or two.

A sharp intake of air drew his attention to the door. He glanced away from his task, searching for its source. His heart skipped a beat. A woman stood framed in the morning fog, pale skirts billowing in the breeze.

He did not believe in ghosts, but the woman before him fit the description he'd been given of Lady Isabel Staunton. She was tall and lean with piercing green eyes. The sun's rays cut through the fog, casting her in an eerie glow.

There was no way. It couldn't be. He blinked, then blinked again, but she did not disappear.

Once he recovered from the shock, he noticed her modern clothing and honey-colored hair. The lady wore a flowing mint day gown with a high waistline and short sleeves. A bonnet framed her heart-shaped face, its ribbons tied beneath her chin. She most certainly wasn't a spirit. Though she had the beauty of an angel.

He opened his mouth to speak.

She marched toward him, wagging one gloved finger. "You have no right to be here, intruder. This is private property. I insist you gather your mount and depart at once."

Her fearless approach held him captive. He studied her tall frame and blazing eyes, her words barely registered through his fascination. What had she called him? An...intruder?

She came to a halt before him, placing her hands on her hips, then peered at him through the loveliest green eyes he'd ever beheld. "What have you to say for yourself?"

"Are you the owner of this castle?" He searched the depths of her gaze, both angry and amused by her behavior.

She steeled her back, anger flashing in her eyes.

“Answer me.” He rested one hand on the wall, leaning against it. “Do you own Almerry Castle?”

Notching her chin in defiance, she said, “No, I do not.” She pointed one finger at him, holding it just inches from his chest. “But neither do you.”

He could have set her straight right then. Told her he owned Almerry Castle. Instead, he smirked, the urge to bait the chit too strong to ignore. “In that case it seems you are an intruder.”

Her cheeks tinted a becoming shade of pink, yet she did not avert her gaze. “I have far more right to be here than you do.”

He dropped his hand from the cool stone wall and took a step closer to the spirited beauty. Her scent wrapped around him, enticing his senses with vanilla and jasmine. It had been a long time since he’d smelled a woman’s flowery scent. A fact his body could not ignore. He fought the sudden urge to pull her into his arms and said, “How so?”

Camden expected her to back away at his intrusion of her personal space, but instead, she held her ground, her stormy eyes never leaving his. “Not that I owe you an explanation, but I reside in the area and saw light coming from the windows last night. I felt it was my duty to check on the castle.”

“And your husband allowed you to march over here and confront an unknown intruder?” The words left his mouth before he had time to consider them. It was a pointless question. He did not care whether she was married or not. Courting was the furthest thing from his mind.

“My parents did not know my intentions,” she said, her tone cheeky. “Not that my marital state is any of your concern.”

A smile spread across his face, though he could not imagine why. He certainly did not want the viper-tongued lady for himself. Still, he rather enjoyed verbally sparring with her.

He angled his head so his lips hovered just in front of her ear. "I could be dangerous."

She flinched but did not step away from him. "I am not afraid of you."

"You should be." He straightened, meeting her gaze once again. Not a hint of fear reflected back at him. The chit was either daft or made of steel.

"I will not allow you to intimidate me," she said, as she crossed her arms over her chest.

He leaned back against the wall, his gaze locked on hers. "I am Captain Camden Beauchamp, descendent of Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel Beauchamp and rightful owner of Almerry Castle."

The lady's eyes flashed with anger, her hands fisted at her sides. "Why didn't you say so the moment I arrived? Why play games when the truth would have been simpler?" Without giving him the opportunity to answer, she pivoted and marched for the stables exit.

He closed the distance between them, then took hold of her elbow. "You were too busy ordering me off my land to have listened."

The words he spoke were not entirely true. He'd baited her on purpose for his own amusement, but he never expected her to become so upset. Now his deception caused his chest to squeeze as he stared at her striking profile. The woman was truly beautiful.

She did not flinch, nor did she spare him a glance. She stood frozen upon the green summer grass, her back straight and shoulders squared as though she'd been carved in stone-an ornament belonging to the castle. After a long moment, he released her.

Without as much as a sigh, she strolled toward the gatehouse.

He narrowed his eyes as she moved further away, her feminine form washed in the sunlight and fog, hips swaying with each step. She'd been brave to confront him. It was an

admirable trait. He should apologize. Give her credit where she had earned it. He'd wager very few people would not have taken an interest and sought to protect his property. At the least, he owed her for that.

"I am sorry for not revealing my identity sooner," he called after her. "I should not have bated you as I did."

She glanced over her shoulder, eyes squinted. "I do not believe you regret your actions, nor do I believe you are the rightful owner of Almerry."

He stared at her in disbelief. How dare she call him a liar? The chit was positively vexing. "Your beliefs are of no consequence. I am Captain Camden Beauchamp, and I do own this property. As for my apology, I withdraw it."

"I would have expected nothing less." Without sparing another glance, she made her way across the bailey, then through the gatehouse, before disappearing from his view.

Regret coursed through him, for he knew nothing about the lady. Not even her name. The only information she'd given was that her estate sat nearby. There were several country homes close enough for the occupants to have seen his lantern. Anyone of them could be hers. He should chase after her and demand to at least have her name.

Ridiculous, he had no need of a name when he did not care to see her again. Camden shook his head. Whoever the lady might be, one thing was certain: she was the most vexing woman he'd ever encountered. If he never crossed paths with her again, he would not miss her. On the contrary, he'd be grateful.

Determined to forget about her, he marched back to the stable and tossed himself into the work at hand. No matter how many stones he moved, or how long he labored, the confrontation with her continued to tumble through his thoughts.

With his saddle secured, he threw himself onto the stallion's back and squeezed his heels against the beast's sides. He had better things to do than think of the viper-tongued chit.

Bloody hell, she'd called him a liar and an intruder. He had little doubt she would be back.

He would have to be prepared, and it was well understood among those in the military that one gained an advantage by knowing their adversary. He called her image into mind, blond hair and flashing green eyes on a tall feminine figure wrapped in the intoxicating scents of vanilla and jasmine.

Indeed, he would know his adversary.

Three



Rebecca clutched the delicate fabric of her skirts in her fists, feeling the lace and embroidery dig into her skin. She quickened her pace until she was jogging across the plush landscape, the verdant grass cushioning each step. The sun cast long shadows that danced playfully around her feet. Mother would give her an earful about proper ladylike behavior if she caught sight of her in such a state, but what did it matter? The way Rebecca felt inside, raging and on fire, couldn't be tamed by corsets and curtsies. She needed to burn off her anger somehow, lest it consume her completely.

Not in all of her years had she met a man as devilishly handsome and utterly vexing as Captain Beauchamp. A roguish smile had played across his lips, and his piercing blue eyes seemed to bore into her very soul. He set her blood boiling, riling her with his words and demeanor, all while holding her captive with his bold looks and cocky charm.

Even now, excitement pulsed through her, bringing every nerve to life. Her heart had thundered against her ribs, her skin had tingled and her breath had struggled at his nearness. She had never experienced such fire or passion as this. All of her senses had been heightened as she'd faced off with him, and when he'd whispered in her ear, a part of her wished he would pull her into his arms.

The captain had tousled dark hair, which she longed to run her fingers through. He was dangerous, a military man. He fought in wars. How could she desire him? Her cheeks warmed at the thought and she hastened her steps. Partly to put

distance between her and Captain Beauchamp, but also because she needed to hurry home.

She'd avoided notice by rising before anyone else and making her way to Almerry as the sun crested the horizon. By now, the entire house would be awake and her absence was surely noted. Not that it mattered as all, save for Phoebe, would believe she had simply taken a morning walk. She loathed this house party and Mother's match-making efforts. Regardless, she had to return, and as much as it pained her, she would have to engage in the day's activities.

The thought of spending all afternoon in her mother's matchmaking company made her stomach sour. She loved her mother a great deal and would even go as far as saying she respected her mother's desire to see herself and Phoebe well married, but it did not change the fact that Rebecca had no desire to be matched.

Perhaps she'd join her father's hunting party. A novel idea. For once the hounds were released, she could ride in any direction she chose.

With renewed vigor, Rebecca rushed to her bedchamber. After ringing for her maid, she yanked off her bonnet and cloak, letting the garments fall to the carpet. Rebecca reached into the armor and retrieved her black velvet riding habit. The hunting party would depart soon and she meant to be among them. She peered out her window at the men gathered below. No time to tarry.

The shuffle of feet made her turn toward the door, expecting her maid. She released a sigh at the sight of her sister.

"There you are. Tell me, did you discover the source of your light?" Phoebe said as she sashayed into the room, her silk fan fluttering gracefully in front of her face. She settled onto the mahogany vanity, pinning Rebecca with an intent stare.

Rebecca's heart raced, for she knew she could not lie to Phoebe, and once everyone discovered Camden's presence, it would be all they spoke of. The last thing she wanted was

constant reminders of the captain, and that he was right across the creek at Almerry. “You didn’t tell anyone, did you?” Rebecca asked, a slight catch in her voice.

“Don’t be a ninny. Your secrets are safe with me.” Phoebe tilted her head, her hazel eyes studying Rebecca. “Now do tell what you discovered.”

Rebecca brushed lint off the bodice of her habit. It would serve her no purpose to lie to her twin. Phoebe would see right through any tale she wove. She’d never been able to hide anything from her sister, no matter how badly she’d wished to.

Rebecca averted her gaze, pretending nonchalance. “I figured out the source of the mysterious glimmers, but there’s nothing special about it.”

“You are withholding important information from me. Should I go tell Mother about your morning adventure?”

“No. You must stay silent about this.” Rebecca held her dress close to her body. “You cannot say a word, Phoebe. Promise.”

“It was only a jest. I told you I will not speak a word of this and I shan’t. But do tell me what happened before I perish with curiosity.” Phoebe lifted her arm to place the back of her hand across her forehead in a dramatic flourish.

“Very well.” She sighed, glancing down at her velvet riding habit as she drew in a breath. “Almerry’s owner is in residence.”

Phoebe’s eyes grew round. “No one has bothered with that pile of stones in centuries. It cannot be fit for inhabitation. Who is he? Why is he there?”

“A despicable reprobate with terrible manners named Captain Camden Beauchamp, and I really could not say.” Rebecca turned her back to Phoebe. “There, I’ve told you all I know. Now be a dear and help me change.” She cast a glance over her shoulder. “I do not know what is keeping my maid, but I must hurry if I’m to join the hunt.”

Phoebe rose, then came to Rebecca, helping her to slip into the gown before working to fasten the row of buttons along

her back. “He must have done something remarkable to earn your description of his character,” she said softly. “Why do you harbor such an ill opinion of the man?”

“He amused himself at my expense while he withheld his identity.” She reached for her riding hat and pins, an unwelcome storm of emotions—outrage, desire, curiosity—raging through her. “For the first time in my life, I wish I would have stayed away from Almerry Castle.”

Phoebe looked up through thick lashes, a small grin tugging at her lips. “Is he handsome?”

Rebecca hesitated, looking away as she considered her words. She let out a deep sigh before responding. “He is... handsome, I suppose. But he is too obnoxious by far. His cocky demeanor and vexing words make him all together unbearable.” She smoothed her hands down her skirt before placing her bonnet on her head, avoiding Phoebe’s gaze. “I hope to never see him again.”

Phoebe laughed, a wide grin spread across her face, and amusement sparkled in her eyes. “I think I would like to meet this Captain Beauchamp. If only to judge him for myself.”

“Believe me, dear sister, you do not.” She strolled to the doorway. “If you’ll excuse me, I intend to join Father’s hunting party.”

“More likely, you intend to disappear while the others hunt.” Phoebe shot Rebecca a bemused glance. “You don’t fool me. You never have.”

A shaky smile tugged at Rebecca’s lips despite her annoyance. “I beg to disagree, for what is hunting other than disappearing into the landscape, which I absolutely intend to do.”

Phoebe laughed. “In that case, enjoy the hunt.”

Rebecca winked at her sister. “I intend too.”

Four



Lingering wisps of fog clung to the ground as Rebecca steered her mount toward the hunting party. As she drew closer, she offered a smile to her father, who sat atop his white stallion, his gaze meeting hers. Fine lines softened the corners of his deep blue eyes as he looked at her.

“I’m glad you joined us, poppet.” He said, adjusting the reins in his leather-gloved hands as his horse shuffled from side to side. “I will start the hunt once Captain Beauchamp arrives.” He turned his attention to the rolling hills leading toward Almerry, and Rebecca followed suit.

When had Father made Captain Beauchamp’s acquaintance? Her stomach lurched, her lips pressing into a tight line as she tried to come up with a plan of escape. She didn’t want to face him again; not after this morning.

Glancing back at the house, she weighed her options. Should she pretend to be ill again? Mother would likely call the doctor if she did. It would be troublesome but better than facing Camden, or worse, everyone discovering that she had already met the captain. Still, a traitorous part of her elated at the idea of seeing him again.

She contemplated running and staying, lingering in a state of uncertainty, wanting both but unable to commit to either path. Her heart warred on, growing more uneasy with every passing second until...

“Ah, here’s the captain now.” Father lifted his hand, waving the captain over.

It was too late. She was well and truly cornered.

Captain Beauchamp, with his dashing good looks and easy smile, rode toward them. Rebecca's stomach flipped at the sight of him, her cheeks burning as memories of their morning encounter flooded back. She resolutely kept her gaze on her horse's neck, hoping he wouldn't give away their secret.

"Captain Beauchamp," Father began in a booming voice, "I'm pleased you could join our hunt. Allow me to introduce my daughter, Lady Rebecca." He gestured toward her and she forced a smile onto her face before meeting Camden's gaze.

His features softened into an appreciative smile, and he tipped his head politely in her direction. "A pleasure, my lord," he said to Father before turning his attention back to Rebecca. "On both counts," he added, a roguish gleam in his blue eyes.

Rebecca felt an unwelcome thrill race through her at his words and smiled despite herself. This was dangerous. One misstep could cost her dearly, but for now she was safe—or so it seemed from the way Father was looking between the two of them approvingly.

Still, she knew better than to get too comfortable around Captain Camden Beauchamp—no matter how attractive or charming he may be, there was no denying that his presence was trouble waiting to happen.

If father were to find out she had so brazenly approached Camden, he'd assign a proper and permanent chaperone to her. And mother... A shudder ran down Rebecca's spine. Mother would try to match them.

She guided her horse to follow the hunting party, biding her time. When the opportunity presented, she would make her escape. Camden would follow the hounds along with the rest of the hunters, and she would find a quiet place to spend the afternoon.

She snuck a peek at him. Her heart skipped a beat as the devil flashed her a knowing smile, then winked at her before returning his attention to the dogs. A feverish blush rushed

over her cheeks, and she bit down on her lip to stifle the sensations running through her.

“Release the hounds.” Her father’s booming voice filled the air, startling her out of her thoughts.

She spurred her mount forward, following the pack of hounds toward the river. She’d have to wait until everyone was well distracted to separate from them. It would not do to be noticed.

The hounds cut east across the property, the hunting party riding behind them. She slowed her mount to put more distance between herself and the others. Once she was certain everyone’s attention was firmly on the hunt, she directed her horse away from the pack and toward Almerry. The castle was her favorite place to pass time, and since Camden had joined the hunt, she had no reason to fear being caught there.

The castle walls jutted up from the lush green grass, inviting her closer. Rebecca rode across the shallow creek, water splashing up in her wake, and a sense of freedom surged through her. As she galloped up the slope toward the postern wall, she patted the book hidden in the folds of her skirt. She could think of no better way to spend a summer afternoon.

Rebecca tethered her horse to a nearby tree and retrieved her book. A cool breeze tossed the curls around the back of her neck as she strode closer to the postern gate. She took in the sight before her, marvelling at the history and grandeur of Almerry Castle. Her mind wandered as she thought about its past. Who had been there before? How had it become so battle-scarred?

The castle walls were made of limestone and granite, and Rebecca could see where arrows had once struck. It was an impressive sight, one that stirred up excitement and wonderment deep within her.

She lifted one hand, trailing her fingers across the rough, cool bricks. They held secrets, of that she was certain. The whole castle had a story to tell. Oh, she knew a little, but she longed to hear the entire tale. Her eyelids fluttered shut. Someday.

“My lady.”

Rebecca’s heart skipped a beat and her throat went dry as Camden’s voice filled the air. She had hoped he wouldn’t follow her here, but it seemed he had keenly observed her separation from the hunting party.

Her fingers froze, still trailing along the rough limestone and granite of the castle walls. She could feel his presence behind her, and she shivered despite the warmth of the summer sun. He was closer now, too close for comfort.

“My lady,” he said again, this time with more authority in his voice.

Rebecca slowly turned to face the vexing man. His gaze upon her made her heart flutter, and she found herself at a loss for words.

“The hounds went east,” Camden said, gesturing off into the distance with one hand. “Whatever are you doing here?”

He stepped closer as he spoke and Rebecca unconsciously took a step back, almost tripping over a rock in her haste to maintain some distance between them. Her cheeks burned at being caught here—on his land—by him. What must she look like from his perspective? No doubt he thought her a flighty young girl who had strayed from the safety of the party in pursuit of something foolish.

Seeing no other choice, Rebecca decided to brazen it out. After all, she was the daughter of a powerful earl. With an air of defiance, she met Camden’s gaze. His blue eyes danced mischievously and in that moment, she’d have given anything to smack the smirk off his too-handsome face. “I lost the trail.”

“And you happened to have a book with you by coincidence.” He nodded at her hand where she clutched the leather bound volume she’d intended to spend the afternoon getting lost in.

Drat. She’d forgotten all about the book the moment she’d heard his voice. Her pulse quickened. “Never mind me. What are you doing here? You were on the hunt as well.”

“I forgot all about the hunt the moment I saw you.” He drew closer to her.

Heat flared across her chest, up her face. “Me?”

“Indeed. I find myself quite captivated by you, lady Rebecca. I had hoped I might meet you again. It is the very reason I accepted Lord Chesterfield’s invitation. Though I was not aware that you were his daughter, nor did I expect to find you along for the hunt.”

Invitation? Lord Chesterfield? Drat! Father had invited him to the house party. She edged away, her back bumping into the postern gate. “And now?”

“Now I intend to make amends. Let us forget this morning and begin anew.” He captured her hand in his, sending a fresh wave of heat spiraling through her.

“Why?” she asked, breathless. As she awaited his answer, she felt like a snared rabbit desperate to escape. The thumping of her pulse echoed in her ears as she awaited his reply, tension building with each passing heartbeat as she fought to maintain a calm exterior. She had no wish for him to know how much he was affecting her.

“I intend to stay at Almerry, leastwise, for the foreseeable future. I am also attending your family’s house party. Would it not be best for us to become friendly?”

Rebecca didn’t allow Camden’s words to sway her. She knew that a man such as him would be a dangerous distraction she had no desire to cultivate.

He shifted his weight from one leg to the other, his gaze searching her face for any sign of relenting. But Rebecca was resolute, despite the tugging sensation in her chest each time their eyes met.

“I suppose it would make things more pleasant,” she finally conceded, though she was careful not to reveal how much he affected her with just one glance. “That is, if I planned on spending time in your company. I assure you, I do not.”

Camden chuckled softly and stepped closer to her until they were only inches apart. His blue eyes held hers captive as his gaze roamed over her face before coming back up to meet hers once more. She held her breath as he slowly leaned toward her until she could feel the warmth of his breath against her cheek and smell the faint hint of mint on his lips... “And if we cross paths again?”

Rebecca felt her heart racing as Camden’s lips hovered dangerously close to hers. She could feel the heat emanating from his body, the scent of his cologne filling her senses. Her eyes fluttered shut as she awaited his next move, a part of her daring him to close the gap between them.

“If we cross paths again,” Camden whispered, his breath hot against her skin. “I expect you to share a book with me.”

Rebecca’s eyes flew open, surprised at the unexpected turn of events. Her mind raced as she fought to regain her composure. “I suppose that could be arranged,” she replied coolly, taking a step back to put some space between them.

Camden merely grinned at her response, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “I look forward to it, my lady.”

With a slight bow, he turned and strode off, leaving Rebecca alone with her racing thoughts. As she watched his retreating figure, she couldn’t help but feel a sense of excitement and anticipation. It was rather like being drawn to a flame. She knew touching it would burn, but could not stop herself from drawing close.

Five



Camden stood back and surveyed his handiwork. He had just finished nailing the last nail into the stall door, and now the heavy door was securely in place. A layer of grim and dust covered his face and hands, and his clothes were now stained with dirt and sweat. He tried to brush away the streaks of dust on his shirt, but only smeared the dirt further with his efforts.

As he wiped his brow with a soiled sleeve, Camden couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction. He had done this alone and the stall door was now secure. He stepped away from the stall and looked down the length of the stable, feeling a deep sense of contentment.

A hearty neigh drifted from a nearby stall, and he turned to see his horse as it whinnied and tossed its brown head.

"You don't care for the noise. Do you, boy?" He grinned and rubbed his aching back. "A few more nails and then you will have peace."

The day had been hectic. He'd made up a makeshift bed in one of the third-floor chambers, and the old solar now contained a wingback chair along with a table. Woodworking had always been a hobby of his. The work allowed him to focus his energy on something other than Rebecca and his memories of the war.

He'd supervised cleaning and repairs around the castle and seen the kitchen stocked with food. Lord Chesterfield had been most generous insisting Camden use one of his footmen

rather than going into Manchester himself to hire laborers and purchase supplies. The gesture saved him copious amounts of time. Now he had two servants and the necessary commodities to keep the castle running.

He glanced at the stable's exit. Rebecca's heart-shaped face, lush rosy lips, and fiery green eyes intruded on his thoughts. He snatched up another nail and pounded it into the wood as if to chase the memory away. The hammer slipped, landing a blow to his thumb.

"Bloody hell." Camden grimaced as he shook his throbbing hand. He had been so lost in thought that he had not paid attention to the hammer's aim. His thumb was now covered in a small trickle of blood, and he hastily wrapped a handkerchief around it.

Not even the pain in his thumb dulled the memory of her.

No lady had ever turned her back on him before, but Rebecca had done so twice in the same day. By all accounts, he was a handsome and successful captain in the British Army. Women threw themselves at him everywhere he went. But not Rebecca.

He returned the hammer and nails to the tack room, then massaged the back of his neck as the time he'd spent with Rebecca replayed through his mind. She'd treated him like a fly buzzing about her golden curls and showed him away just as fast.

Another neigh made him turn his head back toward the entrance. Rebecca had stood in that very spot, capturing his curiosity from the first moment he laid eyes on her. She'd been bold and vexing, but also fearless and beautiful. Then later, at the castle wall, he'd seen her passion and fire as they faced off again. The warmth of desire spread through him at the memories. How he had longed to kiss her. Heaven help him, he longed to do more than kiss. He wished to know more about her—to know all of her.

He'd had no intention of attending the house party beyond the hunt, despite what he'd said to Rebecca. Lord Chesterfield had extended the invitation, but Camden had not committed to

attending. He had only joined the hunt, hoping to discover who she was. House parties and such were the very things he aimed to avoid by lingering at Almerry rather than returning home.

But Rebecca had changed his mind with a few coy words. She'd presented a challenge he could not refuse. His stomach soured. He could not sway her opinion of him if he did not spend time with her.

Ack! He would go mad if he kept thinking about her. He glared at his still throbbing thumb. If the chit weren't so distracting...

But she was distracting—and beautiful and witty and brave. To the devil with it. He had to see her again, and because he had to see her again, he would attend the house party. But first he needed to bathe and dress.

He entered the keep, then mounted the old stone stairs, making his way up to the makeshift bedchamber. His eyes watered from the dirt and debris clinging to every inch of his person. He wiped one filthy hand across his brow. Thankfully, he'd traveled with extra clothing. Not the most fashionable garments, but they would suffice for now. If he meant to stick around for more than a few days—and he believed he did—he'd have to expand his wardrobe.

A grin pulled at his mouth. What would Rebecca wear this evening? He quickened his pace, taking two steps at a time. Would she truly act as though he were invisible? An intense feeling of excitement flooded his body at the thought.

Camden wasted no time washing and dressing. Within an hour, he looked every bit a gentleman and had departed for the Chesterfield's estate.

The whisper of voices mixed with laughter bubbled from the crowded music room as he entered. Camden stiffened for a heartbeat, then drew in a cleansing breath before stepping across the threshold. Rebecca wouldn't brush him off this time. He wouldn't allow her to.

A crush of elegantly clad gentlemen and ladies filled the space, but his gaze went directly to the pianoforte. Rebecca stood beside the instrument, her cheeks flushed a becoming shade of pink. Her voice soothed his soul, chasing away the tension in his muscles. The room seemed to empty of everyone, save for the two of them.

He could listen to her sweet soprano for eternity without complaint. His pulse beat in his throat, keeping rhythm with her song. He moved closer. She stood with one rounded hip cocked toward the pianoforte, her eyes sparkling.

“Captain Beauchamp.”

A hand clapped Camden’s shoulder, startling him. Camden glanced sideways to find Lord Chesterfield grinning at him.

“I’m pleased you joined the party. My daughters are entertaining us for a spot.” Lord Chesterfield nodded toward Rebecca and the woman seated next to her at the pianoforte.

“They are quite talented, my lord.” Camden allowed a smile before his gaze drifted to Rebecca once again.

“They get it from their mother. Have you been introduced to my dear wife?” Lord Chesterfield surveyed the crowded room. “Lady Chesterfield is a lovely woman and I know she’d like to meet you, Captain.”

Camden lifted a glass of claret from a passing servant’s tray. “I would be happy to make her acquaintance, my lord.”

Lord Chesterfield turned, then waved toward an elegant woman. “There she is now.”

The woman came to stand next to Lord Chesterfield, her hazel eyes warm and a welcoming smile on her lips.

“Captain Camden Beauchamp, allow me to introduce our hostess, my delightful wife, Lady Chesterfield.”

Camden bowed over Lady Chesterfield’s hand. “It is a pleasure to meet you, my lady.”

Her smile broadened. “Welcome to our home, Captain Beauchamp.” She turned to her husband. “I trust the captain will be introduced to our daughters.”

“He has already met Lady Rebecca and will be introduced to Lady Phoebe as well.”

“Splendid,” Lady Chesterfield said, her gaze moving to a nearby couple. “Do excuse us Captain Beauchamp.”

Camden barely registered their departure, his gaze firmly fixed on Rebecca. As she sang the last words of the song, her gaze brushed past him. Had she noticed him in the crush, or did he blend in with the masses?

She leaned close to her sister, the curls around her face dancing with her movements. When she straightened, both ladies looked in his direction. Rebecca lifted one honey-colored brow at him. His pulse increased. Was she cross with him for coming, or happy to see him?

Her face gave no clues. He shrugged a shoulder while searching her expression. She nodded toward the door, disappearing through it a moment later.

Camden swallowed past the tightness in his throat, glancing around the room. Had anyone else noticed her brazen invitation? By the looks of it, everyone was engaged in conversation or distracted by drinks and food.

He strolled across the room, making his way toward the door. Sweat gathered on his palms as he moved into the long hallway. He liked to be the one in control, but for now he had little choice other than to let Rebecca take the lead, for he would not turn down an opportunity to speak with her.

The sharp, echoing thud of his footfalls reverberated against the polished marble floor as he made his way down the long hallway. Candles flickered along the corridor, casting shadows that danced along the walls and floor. He peered into each room he passed—a drawing room with thick velvet curtains and overstuffed armchairs; a library with shelves lined from end to end with leather-bound books; a game room with a billiards table and well-stocked sideboard. But none of them contained Rebecca.

Where had the minx gone? He paused at the next door, hearing the sound of skirts rustling, and peeked inside.

Rebecca reached out and grabbed his jacket lapel. She tugged him into the office, closing the door behind them. Her green eyes blazed. "Why are you here?"

"I told you I would attend when we spoke earlier." He grinned. "I mean to become better acquainted with you."

She strolled over to a large window. Her elegant fingers smoothed a fold in the velvet drapes. "You are wasting your time."

He needed common ground. Something that interested her more than her desire to be rid of him. Something like... Almerry. "Tell me. How many times have you breached my castle's walls?"

Rebecca spun on him, a light blush upon her cheeks. "What are you accusing me of, Captain?"

He could not fight his smirk. "We both know I speak the truth. On at least one occasion, you strolled through Almerry's gate."

She placed her hands on her hips. "I came after an intruder. How was I to know you were actually the owner?"

"I do not begrudge your actions. You simply took me by surprise when you marched into my stable and ordered me from my land." He moved to sit on a nearby chaise. Perhaps if he looked less formidable, she would soften. "In truth, I quite admire you for it. Now tell me, how many times have you visited Almerry?"

"This is ridiculous," she said, then strode toward the door.

Camden stood and placed himself in front of the exit. "Today, I found you by the postern gate. Do you visit often?" He offered a smile he hoped was friendly. "There is no need to be defensive. You have leave to enter Almerry whenever you wish."

"I do?" She blinked at him, her lips parting in surprise. "Why?"

"Because I believe you care for the castle."

Rebecca's shoulders relaxed a measure. She looked at him, silent for long heartbeats. It seemed he had her attention at last. A strange pull formed in his chest. "I realize you mean no harm to Almerry. I daresay you may even care for it more than I do." He took a step closer.

"The castle fascinates me. For as far back as I can remember, I have been quite taken with Almerry."

"You have?"

She nodded. "The legends of your ancestors, the love they were rumored to share, I find it all very inspiring." A warm smile lifted the corners of her mouth. "Do you know the locals claim you can hear them call to each other on still nights? Have you heard of Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel's legend?"

Merriment coursed through him at his small victory. At least for this moment, he had won Rebecca over. He was not fool enough to believe the war between them over, but he was the clear victor of their current battle.

A hollowness filled his chest at the foolish notion. His ambition had been to win her friendship, and it seemed he had. He had no further reason to remain in her company, no reason to attend the remainder of the party. Why did he find the idea so unsettling? He should be celebrating, not contemplating further skirmishes.

"You do not have to tell me." She reached for the door.

"Wait," he said.

She met his gaze. "Whatever for?"

"As enchanting as the legend is, there are no ghosts at Almerry."

The doorknob rattled. Rebecca's face paled. She leaned her weight against the door. "Hurry," she whispered as she tugged him behind the curtain.

His heart leaped, his pulse hammering as he pulled her close behind the heavy velvet, his back pressed to the cool glass of the window while his insides burned with newly kindled desire.

“Rebecca, are you in here? Mother and Father are looking for you.” A moment later, the door clicked shut.

Camden released the breath he’d been holding.

She glanced up at him, green eyes dark and lips parted. He could no more prevent himself from kissing her than he could stop the tides from rising. He brought his lips to hers and tasted the sweetness of her mouth, his arms tight around her waist. She hesitated only a moment before meeting his demand. She parted her lips, her tongue sliding against his, and the world fell away until all he could feel was her body pressed against his, the softness of her lips against his feeding the fire of his desire.

When they finally broke apart, both panting and flushed, Camden realized with a start what they had done. It was foolish and reckless, but he couldn’t find it within himself to regret it. He had kissed Rebecca, and it was the most exhilarating thing he had ever done.

She looked up at him, her eyes dark with desire and lips kiss-swollen. “We should return to the party.”

Camden nodded, his heart feeling full in a way it never had before. “I’ll go first,” he said before slipping out of the room and making his way back to the music room, eager to leave before his body betrayed him again.

Six



Rebecca tugged on her horse's reins, slowing the animal as she neared Almerry's gatehouse. Would Camden accept her apology for the way she'd behaved with him? How would he treat her once she'd trotted through his gates? Would he continue to be the man she'd spoken to last—the one who kissed her—or would he revert to the brute she'd first met?

Her stomach knotted and a wave of nervousness wash through her as she thought about it. She knew she shouldn't care what his impression of her was—and yet, there was something about him that enthralled her.

Rebecca had noted how handsome Camden was upon their first meeting. Tall and broad of shoulder with dark hair and piercing blue eyes. He was enough to make any lady swoon. And the way he'd kissed her... Her heart fluttered at the memories.

Even when he'd spoken to her in such a rude way, she'd found herself enthralled by his good looks. Then she'd discovered he was a soldier. The vexation his earlier words had caused in her morphed into a burning dislike overshadowing her initial attraction. Soldiers were not to be desired or befriended unless wished to invite heartache, and she most certainly did not. Still, he'd garnered a spark of interest within her.

Their meeting in the office caused her initial interest to bloom. Two days had passed, and she'd attempted to keep Camden from her mind, but to no avail. When he'd given her

such generous leave to visit the castle, he'd weakened her resolve. Then he'd kissed her, leaving her in an unfamiliar state of longing that shattered her resolve. Soldier or no, Captain Camden Beauchamp captivated her. She sighed. It was impossible to despise such a man as he.

Her eyelids fluttered closed. She could no longer fight him, and she owed him an apology of her own. Her ill manners had been uncalled for and most unladylike.

She drew a deep breath and steered her mount through the opening. There would be no turning back now. Not that she wished to. Rebecca had no desire to turn around. She needed to set things right between them.

Rebecca took a deep breath and straightened her back as she continued toward the gatehouse. As she approached the bailey, her breath caught. Camden stood in the center of the bailey clad in nothing more than a pair of tan breeches. The muscles in his back corded, arms stretched above his head. She stared at him, jaw slack, her gaze trailing over his exposed skin, sun-kissed and glistening. She was mesmerized.

The loud whinny of her horse interrupted Camden, and he spun around. A flush of heat wash over her face, tingling down her neck and chest—he had caught her ogling him. Embarrassment swelled in her as she contemplated what he must think of her now. She wanted to turn away and flee, but found herself unable to move, captivated by the sight before her.

“Rebecca.” His eyes danced as he reached for his nearby shirt. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

She averted her gaze to the old stone wall. If her cheeks got any hotter, she'd incinerate. What had she been thinking to blatantly ogle him as she had? He likely thought her some sort of wanton, no better than a harlot, come to gape at his exquisite form.

“I'm decent now,” he said, his tone carrying a hint of laughter.

His deep voice unfurled a fresh wave of longing deep in her core. She wrapped one arm around her stomach. She had to get away from him. She should speak her piece and go before she embarrassed herself further.

He stepped in front of her, reaching for her horse's reins. "Allow me to assist you."

She glanced at him, met his gaze just long enough to speak. "I am sorry for the way I treated you." The tremor in her voice made her cringe.

He gave a devilish grin. "I rather like how you've been treating me."

Her eyes narrowed at the amusement in his gaze. How dare he make fun of her? She'd been right to dislike him, after all. The reprobate enjoyed her discomfort. He was certainly not a gentleman.

She sucked in a shallow breath. "I...I only came to apologize for my poor treatment of you, and now I have. I'll be on my way."

He held tight to her reins, his gaze sweeping her face. His brows drew together.

"Please release my horse. I would like to be on my way." She glanced at the gatehouse. Her pulse racing.

"Are you certain you can't stay a bit longer? Perhaps join me in a turn around the bailey? I would like to be friends." His tone was soft and steady.

Heaven help her, but he looked so sincere. What would a short walk hurt? She gave a nod of ascent and reached up to help her dismount. She slid from the saddle and into his arms. Once her feet touched the ground, he stepped back, releasing her. An odd yet comforting sensation lingered in her skin where he had touched her.

"Allow me to secure your mount. I will only be a minute." Camden smiled at her as he led the horse toward the stable.

She pressed the backs of her fingers to her lips as he walked away. A part of her wanted to call out for him to return

her mount so she could leave. Yet her stomach fluttered over the idea of spending time with him.

What could she be thinking? One second Rebecca was filled with anger toward this man, then a heartbeat later she wanted to throw herself into his arms. With a heavy breath, she lowered her hand and looked around.

The summer sun shone down on her, its vibrant light casting shadows around the castle's bailey. She squinted, blocking the light with her arm as her gaze returned to the stable door. When Camden strode out, she made her way over to him. There was no reason for her to stay in the middle of the bailey, waiting for him like a lovesick fool—which she most certainly was not.

Camden offered her his arm, and she wound her hand through the crook of his elbow, allowing him to guide her toward the curtain wall encasing Almerry. An awkward silence hung in the air between them. She could feel her pulse beating, her stomach fluttering—this was ridiculous. Rebecca only wished to befriend him because of Almerry. She had no romantic inclinations toward him. There was no reason at all to be demure. And yet...

Rebecca snuck a glance at him from the corner of her eye. Ridiculous, indeed. She inhaled a cleansing breath, then said, "I have always wondered about the damage to the postern gate and surrounding wall. It seems to be caused from more than age and disrepair. The large hole to the left of the gate has long fascinated me."

"Then you do not know the legend of Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel in its entirety."

"I fear not, but would very much like to." She'd spent years wondering about the badly damaged gate and arched portion of wall. "You will tell me, won't you?" She tilted her head toward him.

"According to family tales, Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel fought side by side to reclaim Almerry from the Scottish. The enemy troops used greek fire to breach the gate, gaining entry to the castle. Lady Isabel and Sir Ariston amassed an army and

arrived in time to prevent the enemy from taking the keep. They fought side by side, and though Lady Isabel suffered the slash of a blade during the battle, but her injury did not stop her from defending her home.” He placed his hand over Rebecca’s, where it rested on his arm. “Lady Isabel and Sir Ariston were married shortly after the battle and remained at each other’s side for the rest of their lives.”

She tossed a glance back at the gate, her gaze roaming over the damaged sandstone. Could his tale be true? It certainly fit with the tales of their great love story. “Legend has it Lady Isabel and Sir Ariston were told by a seer that their children would be legends in their own right.”

“Sir Ariston was part of a long line of feared and valiant knights. Every Beauchamp male for centuries has made a name for himself as a capable and respected knight or soldier. It is a family tradition.”

Her gut clinched, the air freezing in her lungs. She’d been enjoying their time together so much she’d forgotten what he was. Forgotten why he was not for her. A dangerous slip, for she could easily fall for him. Her mood soured, and she glanced back at the gatehouse.

“Are you unwell? Your face has gone pale.” He drew them to a stop and slipped his arm around her. His gaze searching hers. Lines furrowed his brow, but his blue eyes were soft.

“I’m perfectly fine. The chatter of war simply brought back old memories. My brother, Roland... He lost his life fighting against Napoleon’s forces. I’m afraid I will never be able to put his loss behind me.” She swallowed the lump forming in her throat. She’d never spoken to anyone outside her immediate family about Roland’s death. Why had she told Camden?

“I’m sorry for your loss. I was unaware.” He pulled her against him. “War is often an ugly business. Far too many great men have been lost to it.”

For a moment, she allowed her head to rest against his chest. The sound of his heartbeat and warmth of his body comforted her. Standing here with him, pressed against him,

she felt safe, cared for. Except she couldn't find comfort with him. Not in the arms of a soldier. She stepped from his embrace.

“Let us speak of something else.” She took his arm once more. “Have you explored the castle? I mean, beyond the rooms you are occupying.”

He led her toward the turn of the wall that would bring them around the other side of the bailey. “I looked around a bit when I arrived, but I've not been in every chamber, nor have I entered the fifth floor.”

“I should like to spend some time inside. Who knows what treasures remain?”

“If it is your wish to explore the keep, then you shall.”

“Truly?” She beamed at him, her heart swelling. She'd always wanted to enter the keep, but never had she allowed herself the pleasure. So far as she was concerned, Almerry had belonged to Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel. She'd not trespass on their home uninvited. Only now Almerry belonged to Camden, and he'd invited her. Her lips turned up in a wide smile. “You cannot possibly know how happy you have made me.”

He brought them to a halt and stepped in front of her. With one of his bone melting gazes, he reached up and cupped her cheek. “I rather like making you happy.”

Her stomach fluttered. Heat fanned out from where his hand rested on her face. He rubbed his fingers across the tender skin of her neck, just below her ear. Her pulse sped, and she tipped her chin up, inviting his kiss.

He brought his lips to hers, startlingly gentle for such a large man. Her entire body trembled with need. Her arms slid around his neck of their own accord while she rose onto her tiptoes. Heavenly. His kiss could be described in no other way.

He tilted her head, deepening the kiss. Heat engulfed her entire body. She was completely lost in the sensations consuming her. His warmth invaded her, his muscled body formed to hers, his soft but demanding lips possessed hers, and

she was lost. She opened for him, giving him all she had to offer. Taking and giving without reservation.

He embraced her hungrily, his palms a burning brand against her skin. She trembled in response, pushing her fingers into his hair and pressing her mouth hard against his. His tongue danced with hers, igniting an inferno of passion that threatened to consume her whole. Mercy. She had never felt anything so powerful, so intensely passionate as his kisses. Her heart reverberated with warnings—Camden was dangerous. This desire between them was dangerous. It had to stop.

With a monumental act of will, she tore herself away from him and stumbled backward out of his arms. Breathless, she said, “We cannot do this again.” Rebecca averted her gaze, cheeks burning.

Emotions clouded his gaze, and he released a sigh. “I’ll retrieve your mount.”

She focused on the sound of his retreating footsteps as she worked to bring her body under control. What had she been thinking of yielding to him in such a way? And not for the first time. She would not, could not, allow it to happen again. She had to protect her heart and her virtue.

An absurd sadness settled over her, deep as any loss. With the way he affected her, there was no other choice. Rebecca had to guard her heart. She’d have to take care to avoid him from this moment on.

Seven



C amden ran his hand over the old wood trunk's intricate carvings. He should be well on his way home by now, not wandering around the dilapidated walls of Almerry, mooning over a lady. He'd been at the castle for nearly a fortnight. By now, his family would expect him home. Yet... He was spending his time repairing the castle and dreaming of the lady next door.

He'd not seen Rebecca since the day he'd kissed her in the bailey, nearly a sennight ago, but she never left his thoughts for long. The memory still scorched him, leaving him longing for her.

She'd captured more than his interest, her hold on him undeniable. What had started as a brief respite in the country had morphed into something entirely unexpected when he'd met her—when he'd kissed her. She felt the spark between them, too. He could see it in her eyes, feel it in her touch.

She'd felt the same desire to be near him, to touch him as he felt toward her. The evidence was plain in the way she'd wrapped her arms around him, pressed nearer to him, met his demands with her sweet mouth and roaming hands.

So why was she now avoiding him like one did the plague? What was she afraid of? He was determined to find out. Determined to have her in his life. But how could he overcome her objections if he never saw her again?

An astounding need to be near her drove him to her estate each day, but the lady never showed herself. Nor did she seek

him out at Almerry Castle. He rubbed one hand across his chin, his chest tightening. She'd even refused to see him when he'd called on her to tell her of the trunk.

His muscles coiled at the memory of her refusal to see him. He'd spent a considerable amount of time searching nearly every crevice of the old castle, seeking something to share with her, an excuse to call on her. For days, he turned up nothing other than dust and grime. Not so much as a leather strap had been left behind over the centuries. He'd been about to admit defeat this morning when he'd happened upon the old carved trunk tucked into a corner crevice of the lower-level storage room. His heart had skipped a beat as he'd stood staring at it.

How was it intact after all this time? The oak trunk was at least four feet long, massive, and far too heavy to move on his own. He'd left it there and gone to tell Rebecca about it, planning to gift the trunk to her. But after all of his effort, she had turned him away.

He glanced down at the large oak trunk in front of him, desperately wishing to share it with her. No one would appreciate it more than Rebecca. She would wonder who left it here. Wonder if there was anything inside. How he longed to make the discovery with her. Alas, she refused to speak with him.

His own curiosity peaked, and he reached for the iron latch, but jerked his hand back. Rebecca should be the one to open the trunk's lid. She was the whole reason he'd spent so much time searching the chambers of Almerry.

A strange tug pulled at his chest when the image of her smile flooded his thoughts. If something were inside, he wanted to share the discovery with her. He wanted to be the one who made her smile. He'd left a note for her this morning telling her about the trunk. Surely her love for Almerry and its legend would compel her to reply. He would simply have to be patient until she did.

Camden stood to make his way out to the bailey. He wanted to be out there waiting for her when she arrived.

If she arrived.

She would come. Rebecca loved Almerry and longed to know the castle's history too much to ignore such a find as that trunk. No other well-breed lady would have followed his light and investigated its source. She cared deeply for the castle and its propertied ghosts.

She would come.

But what if she did not? What if her desire to avoid him was stronger than her pull toward the castle?

His stomach knotted.

She would come, he reassured himself again. She loved Almerry and its legends too much to turn her back on a piece of its history.

He stumbled clumsily down the ancient stone staircase, his attention focused elsewhere. Missing a stair, he slid abruptly down the remaining steps, his arms reaching for purchase until he crashed into the stone wall at the bottom. A stab of pain shot through him, his breath coming in short gasps as he sagged against the wall. After a moment, he cautiously straightened and stepped away from the wall.

"Camden. My God, are you all right?" Rebecca rushed toward him, her sister close on her heels.

He glanced up at her, his heart warming at the concern reflected in her eyes. "I'm fine. I was just coming down to wait for you."

Her cheeks flushed a brilliant shade of crimson. "I'm sorry, I did not think... You gave me permission before... I...we should have waited outside." She tossed a glance at her sister. Lady Phoebe only grinned, laughter in her hazel eyes.

"No, it's quite alright. I gave you leave to enter at your will. I'll not take it away from you now."

Rebecca's shoulders rounded ever so slightly and a bright smile lit her pretty face. "Are you hurt?"

"Nothing I cannot shake off," he said, then forced his attention away from Rebecca. "Lady Phoebe, a pleasure to see

you again.” He swallowed his disappointment. She was a lovely lady, but he’d wanted to be alone with Rebecca. It was the very reason he’d given the few servants he had tasks to keep them away from the storage areas below. How was he to speak plainly with Rebecca now?

Phoebe nodded. “Likewise. If you wouldn’t mind, Captain, I’d like to take a turn around the bailey while the two of you inspect the treasure you found.”

His heart soared at her words, and he gave a nod of approval.

Rebecca placed her hand on Phoebe’s arm. “Do you not want to see its contents?”

Camden shot Phoebe a grateful smile before settling his gaze back on Rebecca. “We can share what we find with her before the two of you take your leave.”

“I should like that.” Phoebe stepped toward the large arched entry door. “I simply have no desire to wander the dusty keep when I could take in the fresh air out of doors.”

“No need to explain, Lady Phoebe. You are welcome to explore the outside all you wish.” Camden moved to the entry. He pulled the heavy wood door open. “Do be careful around the ruined outbuildings. I fear they are not at all safe.”

“I will take care. Thank you, sir,” Phoebe said, then stepped past him.

He closed the door, a spring in his step. If he had to guess, he’d say Lady Phoebe knew exactly what she was doing, leaving Rebecca alone with him. He had seen a hint of mischief in her eyes.

Clasping his hands behind his back to keep from pulling Rebecca into his arms, he turned to her. She stared at the closed door, cheeks still stained pink, eyes rounded. “It’s not a good idea for us to be alone.”

“Why ever not?” He captured her gaze and smirked.

“It’s not proper. We should have a chaperone.” She strode toward the door. “It is why I brought my sister along.”

He caught her arm, stilling her. “What are you afraid of?” His fingers tingled where they touched her.

She notched her chin up. “I’m not afraid. I would simply like to avoid scandal.”

“In that case, let us go open the trunk.” He winked. “Your sister will safeguard your reputation.” Lady Phoebe did not make an appropriate chaperone, and he well knew it. Rebecca had brought her as a shield, nothing more.

She swallowed, her eyes fluttering closed for an instant. “Very well. Where is the trunk?”

He grinned with satisfaction as he retrieved a lantern. “Follow me. And watch your step.” He wanted to offer his arm, provide her balance as they made their way down the stairs, but he had no wish to upset her. After what he went through to get her here, the last thing he wanted was to give her a reason to flee.

He glanced back at her as he descended the stairs. She followed a few feet behind, her head bent and skirts clutched in one hand. He fought the urge to sweep her into his arms. To show her how he felt and what she meant to him.

“We’re almost there.” Camden held the lantern in front of him as he turned the corner into the storage room.

The lantern illuminated the space, casting a warm glow on the floor and walls. Rebecca gasped, “it is beautiful,” then moved past him to the trunk. She ran her hand over the lid, a slow reverent touch. When she looked up, her gaze was much softer than it had been a moment ago. “Do you think it belonged to Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel?”

Camden moved to stand beside her. “It appears old enough to have been theirs. The iron latches and style of the trunk look to be medieval and there is considerable rust.”

“Is there anything inside?” She bent and feathered her fingers over one latch.

“I did not open it. I wanted you to be the one to do so.”

She met his gaze, eyes sparkling. “Me?”

“I can think of no one else who would experience greater joy in doing so.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “You love Almerry, and it was your idea to explore the keep. You’ve earned the right to open this treasure.”

She crouched in front of the trunk. The hinges creaked as she tried to lift the heavy oak lid. She glanced back at him through thick lashes.

He nodded, waiting for her to continue.

With both hands, she pushed hard against the top of the trunk. The old iron hinges protested, the lid unmistakably rusted shut. He kneeled beside her, desire flaring deep within him when their shoulders touched. “Maybe together we can get it to open?”

She placed her hands back on the old oak top. Camden did the same, and both gave a huge heave. Inch by inch the lid creaked open until they revealed the contents. Rebecca gasped and looked up at him. “How is this possible?”

“I don’t pretend to know. It defies logic that such items could remain intact after so many centuries. Perhaps it is not as old as I suspected.”

She reached into the trunk, her hand hovering just above the contents. “It appears to be clothing, but there is something else here, too.” She pointed at the far inside edge. “It looks like metal, silver maybe.”

“Perhaps it is chain mail.”

“These could be Lady Isabel and Sir Ariston’s garments.” Her eyes sparkled as she feathered her fingers over the red cloth inside. “This is amazing.”

“It belongs to you now.” His heart swelled at having been the one to give her such an incredible gift.

She beamed at him before wrapping her arms around him. “I shall treasure it always.”

He couldn’t help from trailing his hand along her back, relishing the feel of her while fighting the urge to capture her

lips. "I will speak with your father about having the trunk moved to your residence."

She pulled back. "No. I wish for it to remain here. This is where it belongs, at least for now." She turned to the trunk. "It has been here for hundreds of years. It seems wrong to move it."

"Then it shall stay and you can visit it any time you wish. I will see the trunk moved to the second floor entrance hall, and there it will remain."

"Thank you." She lifted the deep red fabric, using only her index finger. "I fear it will crumble into dust if I attempt to handle it overmuch." She nibbled at her lip. "Let us leave it for now."

When she met his gaze, he surveyed her face. A lump formed in his throat. "Why have you been avoiding me? You say you are not afraid of anything, but your actions betray you."

She narrowed her eyes. "My actions? What of yours? Did you not steal a kiss from me? Are you not the same man who told me I should be afraid of you when we first met?" She stood and placed her hands on her hips.

"As I recall, you kissed me back. Ardently." He stepped closer until his chest pressed against her soft breasts. To her credit, she did not run. He smiled. "I am quite certain you enjoyed being kissed. Both times."

A blush tinted her cheeks and her eyes darkened. "You're mad?" she asked, averting her gaze.

He gently palmed her cheek, bringing her gaze back to his. "The way I make you feel frightens you. You think by avoiding me, you can make whatever is between us disappear."

"There is noth—"

"Do not insult yourself by denying what lies between us. I see the truth in your eyes, feel it in your touch. You think of me often, long to feel my lips on yours again."

“You are completely out of bounds. Do not presume to know my thoughts. I’d rather kiss a pig than you.” She turned her back to him but made no move to leave.

“Let us test your theory, shall we?” He spun her back to him and brought his lips down on hers—hard, demanding.

For a moment, she stood stock-still. His stomach rolled. Had she meant what she’d said? Did she feel nothing when they were together? Devil take it, he was a fool. He relented, taking his lips from hers, but then her arms came around him and she tilted her head, giving him better access to the sweetness of her mouth.

He deepened the kiss, pulling her tight against him. His body heated, every nerve tingled, every fiber of his being cried out for her. He broke from her lips, trailing kisses across her cheek, down her neck, across her collarbone.

A soft moan trembled from her as she clung to him. He worked his way across the swell of her breasts, and she arched against him. His hands roamed her curves, finding pleasure in each new discovery. She was so responsive to his touch, he almost lost control. With great reluctance, he pulled away from her before his need became too great.

He rested his forehead against hers and shuddered out a breath. “Would you still prefer a pig?”

She opened her eyes, heavy with desire, and looked up at him. Her voice was barely a whisper when she spoke. “No... that was...”

He smiled and brushed a stray lock of hair from her face. “Only the beginning of what we could share.”

He wanted all of her, but not like this. Not in a storage room in the heat of their battle. She deserved better. He pulled back, his gaze holding hers. “May I call on you tomorrow?”

She ran her tongue across her kiss-swollen lips. Her eyes lowered and her chest rose on a shaky breath. He could see the battle waging within her. Which would win out? Her desire or her fear.

Rebecca met his gaze and nodded.

Eight



Rebecca paced across the parlor. What had she been thinking, agreeing to let Camden call on her? Desire had clouded her judgement. There could be nothing between them. She'd not allow herself to wind up like Daphne, a young widow with a baby living off the charity of her in-laws.

Tears clouded her eyes, and she brushed them away. Her heart ached for Daphne and her nephew as much as it broke for herself and what could have been between her and Camden. She sniffled, then resumed pacing.

The war had ended. Perhaps she had no reason to fear a relationship with Camden. So long as there was no war, he could not die in battle. Besides, he'd not asked for her hand. He had merely asked to call on her. She turned and stalked back across the room.

"Would you please cease that incessant pacing? You're making me dizzy." Phoebe sighed, placing her needlepoint on the mahogany table beside her. "You act like you are headed for the gallows."

Rebecca stopped at the window. "I may well be."

Phoebe arched one brow. "Don't be so dramatic. Captain Beauchamp is a perfectly respectable gentleman, and Mother arranged for you to be chaperoned."

Rebecca peered out the window toward the long drive leading to her home. If Phoebe knew how disreputable Camden truly was, she would forbid the courtship herself. Rebecca touched her lips, recalling the kisses she and Camden

had shared. Her stomach fluttered. Would he kiss her again? She hoped he would. Her cheeks warmed, and she waved her fan in an attempt to cool them.

She belonged in Bedlam for having such a thought. Even more so for surrendering to him, as she had. He could have carried her up to his bed and she would not have complained so long as he continued to kiss her. She was not safe with him. Not as long as her body betrayed her in such a way. And now her heart threatened to falter.

She turned back to Phoebe. “I cannot go through with this. Tell him I have a headache. I am going to my room.” She moved toward the parlor door.

Phoebe stood, her eyes rounded, jaw slackened. “I will do no such thing.” She stepped into Rebecca’s path. “You agreed to spend time with him today, and you shall. Now stop being a goose.”

“I am not being a goose. I have legitimate reasons for not wanting to be around him.” She slapped her fan against her leg.

“Being a soldier is not a legitimate reason for refusing a courtship.” Phoebe placed her hand on Rebecca’s shoulder. “Roland would not have wished for you to behave in such a way. Our brother loved being a soldier and knew the risk he took. He was brave and took pride in fighting for England. You do him no honor by behaving as you are.”

Rebecca’s eyes stung with unshed tears, and she blinked them away. “Sometimes I hate him for getting killed, and for leaving us and his sweet baby behind. Nothing is the same anymore. I miss him so much.” She sniffed and dabbed a handkerchief to the corner of her eyes. “I will not become like Daphne. My heart breaks anew every time I see her.”

“I understand, I swear I do. But it makes no difference who you marry. You cannot guarantee they will live as long as you do. People die young every day and war is seldom the culprit.” Phoebe patted Rebecca’s shoulder. “Just consider it. Allow yourself to get to know Captain Beauchamp before you toss him aside.”

Feet shuffled, and Rebecca turned to the door. Her butler stood in the entrance. A maid scurried past him, taking up her station in the corner. Her stomach turned as she waited for the butler to speak.

“Captain Beauchamp to see Lady Rebecca.” He gave a bow, then backed from the parlor.

Camden strolled in, offering one of his toe curling smiles that made Rebecca’s insides quiver. “Good day, Lady Phoebe. Lady Rebecca.” He bowed.

Rebecca’s pulse sped. Her mind screamed at her to make an excuse to get away, but her legs refused to move. The mere sight of him captivated her. Long muscular legs in tan breeches, tamped waste and broad shoulders scarcely disguised by his elegant navy day coat and starched white cravat. His blue eyes shone in stark contrast to his dark, windblown hair. He was the handsomest gentleman she’d ever seen.

“Good day to you as well, Captain Beauchamp. If you will excuse me, I was just on my way to answer some letters.” Phoebe curtsied, giving him a welcoming smile.

Rebecca narrowed her eyes at Phoebe. How could her sister run off knowing how badly she did not want to spend time alone with Camden? She’d done the same thing at Almerry. Why did she seem so determined to push them together?

“Yes, of course.” He stepped aside, allowing Phoebe to sweep past him and out of the room.

Rebecca watched her disappear through the door in a flurry of yellow skirts. The fluttering returned to her belly the moment she met Camden’s gaze. She rested a hand on her abdomen. “I’ll ring for refreshments. Please have a seat.”

He stepped closer to her. “I thought we might enjoy a stroll through the garden, but if you would rather stay inside, I am happy to join you on the settee.”

She swallowed hard, heat fanning through her like flames being stoked in the hearth. Fresh air might do her some good.

She glanced out the window. “A walk sounds lovely.”

He proffered his arm. From the moment she slid her hand around his biceps, she regretted the closeness. The heat raging inside her increased as he led her into the grand foyer. After she accepted her parasol from the butler, Camden donned his hat and led her outside. He looked even more dashing with that datted hat.

The day was warm, but a cooling breeze danced around her. She opened her parasol, grateful for the shade it cast. Birdsong drifted from the distance. If only she could spread her wings and fly away. But would she really choose to do so? Probably not, for she was drawn to Camden and the flames he stoked within her.

She glanced over her shoulder to ensure the maid followed at a distance. Not that it truly mattered, as one would be hard pressed to consider a maid as a respectable chaperone. Still, it was preferable to being alone with Camden. And they were out of doors where anyone could see them. Yes, a walk was a good way to spend her time with him.

“Lady Chesterfield tells me there is to be a ball.” He guided her onto a path running along the garden’s edge. “Might I request the first dance?”

Rebecca’s breath hitched at the idea of his arms holding her for all the world to see. She both loved for and feared his touch. It was unfair of her to lead him on. The kindest thing she could do would be to end this thing blooming between them. Yet her heart refused to cut ties. Could she truly continue to fight this pull between them? Did she even wish to?

Phoebe’s words echoed in the forefront of her mind. She was indeed being a goose. Her sister was right. Camden would depart for his family home before long. He’d told Father as much. Once he was gone, her life would return to normal. No harm would come from allowing him to court her for a short time.

Not as long as they remained properly chaperoned, and there would be plenty of prying eyes at the ball. She would

need to enlist one of the older married women or a widow as chaperone. Besides, she enjoyed Camden's company.

Having made up her mind, she met his gaze and said, "I should like that."

He tightened his hold on her arm, his hand coming to rest over hers. "I look forward to our dance and long to hold you in my arms once more."

Her heart fluttered at his eloquent words. When she glanced at him, the sincerity in his eyes took her breath away. The possibility of losing her heart to him made her throat tighten. She averted her gaze to the flowering bushes they were strolling past and wondered if losing her heart to him would truly be so bad. He was handsome and kind. Strong and witty. Honorable even if foolish, and clearly loyal. She wagered he would make a steady and true husband.

"I had your treasure moved up to the entry hall. Now you can attend it without my having to worry about your safety."

"You worry about me?" Her words came out whisper-soft.

"Never have I met a lady who charges head first into danger, as you do, Rebecca. I suspect I will never meet another. I admire your fearlessness and determination, but it also frightens me. I'd not have you hurting yourself if I can help it."

Her defenses crumbled, and she moved closer to his side. "I would hardly be in danger going down to the storage room."

"Believe me, those stairs are treacherous." His voice held a teasing lilt.

She stifled a laugh. She'd been terrified for him when she saw him nearly tumble down them. But now the scene proved rather humorous. His expression as he lost his balance with his arms flailing about ran through her mind. A set of steps had bested the skilled soldier. "Indeed they are, she agreed."

He led her toward an iron bench. "Might we sit for a spell?"

She nodded, then moved to sit. “Father tells me you plan to depart for London. What are your plans for Almerry Castle?” The bench’s cool surface seeped through her skirts as she spoke. The shade of a large lime tree offered cooling shade, and she closed her parasol, placing it across her lap.

“When I first arrived, I was planning to return to London, though I am now considering a more permanent stay.” He settled next to her, angling his body toward hers. “I’m considering restoring the castle and making it my permanent home. I find that Northumberland suits me.”

Her breath caught. “I wish you would not.”

His gaze jerked to her, his expression clouding with hurt.

“I mean to say that I wish you would not restore Almerry. Not that I wish you to leave.”

He blew out a slow breath, his gaze turning curious. “It would not please you to see the castle returned to her former glory.”

“I have always thought of Almerry as a memorial to Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel. Their story found its beginning and end within the castle’s walls. It seems wrong to change Almerry, as it is a testament to their love.” She fidgeted with a fold in her skirt, a touch embarrassed at her admission. “Of course, you own the castle now.” She looked up at him through her lashes. “It is yours to do with as you choose.”

“I have no wish to change the castle.” He placed his hand over hers, stilling it. “I rather like your way of looking at Almerry. I only wish to bring it back to life. I want to stay true to the castle’s original design and finishes.”

“You do?” She bit her lip. “I think Lady Isabel and Sir Ariston would like that.”

“I quite agree.” He looked across the garden toward Almerry in the distance. “As far as I am aware, no one has lived at Almerry since they did. The castle belongs to them. I am but its caretaker for a time and wish to do them proud. They gave me a strong heritage, one any man would be proud

of. The least I can do is preserve their beloved home. And I should greatly appreciate your input and guidance.”

“You truly mean it?” Her pulse quickened, her heart leaping with joy.

“I do.” He leaned toward her. “For as long as I live, the castle will remain a monument to Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel. You have my word.”

She tipped her head, and as he leaned closer, her lips parted. He stared into her bright green eyes as he stroked her cheek. “Rebecca, I find myself rather taken—”

A scream split the surrounding air, causing the hair at the back of Rebecca’s neck to stand up. She gasped in surprise as she sprang to her feet. Camden had jerked away at the sound and hurried toward the scream. Rebecca raced after him, fisting her skirts. “That sounded like Daphne. Something’s wrong.”

Camden did not glance back. He called out, “Stay here.”

Daphne’s screams rant the air anew, causing Rebecca’s anxiety to increase and she ran harder, ignoring Camden’s order. She pushed her legs to pump faster.

Her heart skipped a beat when she came around the corner of the stable. Daphne lay on the ground clutching her leg. Tears streaked her face. Her breaths coming in heavy pants. Camden knelt on the grass, leaning over her.

Rebecca dropped to her knees beside them. “What happened?”

“I f-fell from m-my horse,” Daphne said, her face contorting in pain.

Camden brushed Daphne’s hair away from her face. “There now. Everything will be all right.” He glanced at Rebecca. “I sent the stable boy after the horse.”

Rebecca nodded, worry creasing her brow. “We have to get her inside and send for the physician. You carry her in. I will run ahead and send someone to fetch the doctor.” She turned

to the maid who had followed her. "Go ahead of us and turn down Lady Daphne's bed."

Daphne let loose a wretched scream when Camden lifted her into his arms.

Rebecca laid a hand on her shoulder. "You can trust Captain Beauchamp. He will take care of you, I promise." Rebecca waited until she nodded, then ran toward the house, her skirt hiked up to her knees.

She did not slow to look back until she'd reached the entrance. Camden followed not far behind her. Daphne had her arms wrapped around his neck, her face buried against his chest. Rebecca swallowed past the lump in her throat, drew a deep breath, and burst through the door, nearly knocking the footman who stood near the mahogany panel clear off his feet.

The footman's eyes widened. "My lady."

"Daphne is hurt. Send for the doctor at once." She turned her attention to a nearby maid. "Go get Mother. Send her to Lady Daphne's room. Go quickly."

The maid nodded, then hurried up the stairs.

Camden came through the door, Daphne red faced and sobbing in his arms. Rebecca led him to Daphne's chamber, where he placed her on the bed. Rebecca sat on the edge of the mattress, stroking Daphne's cheek.

"Mother's coming, and the doctor as well. You are safe now." Tears pricked at her eyes, but she fought them back. She needed to be strong for Daphne. "Mother will know how to take care of you."

Rebecca looked up, searching the room for Camden. Her face paled. A deep scarlet stream trailed down his hand, dripping onto his breeches. "You're bleeding."

Nine



Camden looked down at his hand, then back at Rebecca. The worry in her gaze tugged at his heart, but also gave him hope. She must care for him to show such concern. He gave a nonchalant shake of his hand and said, “It’s nothing to worry about. I scratched it on the corner of the stable building when I ran past. It will heal.”

“It needs tending.” Rebecca glanced back at Lady Daphne.

“I’ve experienced far worse wounds. I assure you, my hand can wait.” He moved closer to Rebecca, now cradling his injured hand in his unharmed one. “It’s nothing, truly.”

She grimaced before turning her attention to the maid in the corner. “Go fetch linen strips and warm water straight away.”

Lady Chesterfield stepped into the room with Lady Phoebe on her heels. They stopped at the foot of the bed. “What happened?” Lady Chesterfield glanced at Rebecca before her gaze settled on Lady Daphne lying on the mattress.

“She was tossed from her mount. I fear her leg is broken.” Rebecca stood. “The doctor has been sent for.”

Lady Chesterfield moved to stand beside Rebecca’s at the edge of the bed. “Phoebe, have a servant fetch the brandy decanter. A drink will take the edge off of her pain. Then wait for the doctor and show him up the moment he arrives.”

Phoebe nodded before disappearing from the room.

“Captain Beauchamp cut his hand, helping Daphne.” Rebecca glanced at him. “If you will excuse us, Mother. I’d like to tend to his injury.”

“Yes, do take care of the captain.” Lady Chesterfield turned her attention to him. “Captain Beauchamp, you’ve done us a great service. I thank you for it.”

He shifted his feet, uncomfortable with the praise. “I simply happened to be in the right place. Any gentleman would have done the same.”

Lady Chesterfield studied him for a moment, then nodded and turned her attention back to Daphne.

“Come. Let us see to your hand,” Rebecca said with a gentle pressure of her fingers on his arm, indicating that he should follow her out of the room.

He cradled his injury as he followed, the throbbing in his hand intensifying when he tightened his grip around it. They reached the staircase and made their way down. At the foot of the steps, Rebecca turned toward a long hall. The maid she’d sent approached with the requested supplies.

“Take them into the parlor,” Rebecca ordered. She glanced back at Camden, worry etching her features, before scurrying after the maid.

The concern she showed for him made him smile. He knew she found him attractive, enjoyed his company and his touch. But this? A person could not fake the concern radiating from her. Rebecca cared about him even if she refused to admit it.

“Sit over there.” She pointed toward a wingback chair by the hearth before moving to a nearby table.

He smirked at her tight tone, lowering himself into the chair. The maid set her burden on the mahogany table next to his seat before retreating into a corner. Rebecca took a quick survey of the items, then removed her white gloves. Her hands shook slightly as she laid a strip of linen across the table. “Give me your hand.” She reached out, holding her hand palm up.

Camden placed his injured hand on her outstretched one. Warmth spread through him at her tender touch, overshadowing the throb that had been there just moments before.

She dipped a fresh strip of the white linen into a bowl of warm lavender scented water before dabbing the damp cloth on his wound. He winced, and her gaze flickered to his. "Does it hurt terribly?"

"No, just stings a little." He studied the gash across the top of his hand. The wound, more severe than he'd thought, stained the white linen strip scarlet. It looked as though a beast had gnawed at his flesh. Still, the wound was small, barely an inch across. A tight binding would do the trick.

"The doctor is in with Daphne. Her leg is indeed broken, and he's sent for the surgeon to set the bone." Phoebe said from the door. "Should I send the doctor in here when he's finished?"

Rebecca nodded without looking up from her task.

"No, that shall not be necessary. The cut is not as bad as it appears." Camden glanced between the two women.

Phoebe crossed the room to Rebecca's side. Her gaze focused on Camden's hand. "It looks like you caught it on a nail."

"It needs to be properly cleaned, so the wound does not fester." Rebecca wrapped a dry strip of linen around his hand. "It will do you no harm to let the doctor treat your injury."

She made a good argument. More than her words, the worry in her green eyes beseeched him. "Very well," Camden conceded.

Rebecca smiled, giving his hand a barely noticeable squeeze. "Good."

He rather preferred her smile to the worried expression she'd been wearing a moment before. It lit up her whole face, made her eyes sparkle like grass coated in morning dew. He wanted to bask in her happiness for the rest of his days.

His heart skipped a beat. Where had that come from? He had not been searching for a wife, had not even considered the idea before this moment. He looked toward the window. All he had wanted was to spend some time alone before returning to London, yet his chest tightened at the idea of leaving Rebecca.

“I will send the doctor in once he finishes with Daphne.” Phoebe said. “I am going to check on her now, if you will excuse me.” She nodded to him, smiled at her sister, then left the parlor.

Rebecca released his hand and said, “It was truly wonderful the way you cared for Daphne. I am sorry you hurt yourself in the process.” She scooped up the soiled linen strips from the table and placed them in the bowl.

“I have no wish for praise. I did what needed doing, nothing more. I assure you I have been in far worse situations.”

She folded the remaining clean linen strips. “How very modest of you. Nonetheless, you are a hero in my eyes.”

“In that case.” He chuckled. “I can think of other predicaments I would like to rescue you from.” His gaze swept the length of her body, a roguish gleam in his blue eyes.

She smiled and swatted his shoulder playfully. “You’re incorrigible.”

Camden leaned forward, his eyes locking on hers. “Would you like me to show you just how incorrigible I can be?”

Rebecca’s cheeks flushed as she shifted her feet, her gaze flickering to the door. “Camden, we’re in the middle of a crisis.”

“Yes, you are right.” He sighed, his shoulders slumping. “Perhaps another time.”

“Rogue,” she said, then bit her lip. Silence fell between them, the only sound the crackling of the fire in the hearth. Rebecca busied herself with rinsing the stained linen strips, her focus solely on the task at hand. Camden watched her, admiring the way her honey-blond hair fell over her shoulders in cascading waves and the way her hands moved with such

grace. He wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms, to feel her warmth and breath against his skin.

A knock sounded at the door, drawing both of their attention. The doctor entered, his face lined with concern. “Lady Rebecca, Captain, the surgeon has arrived and is upstairs tending to Lady Daphne. I have come to treat Captain Beauchamp’s injury.”

Rebecca moved around to the back of Camden’s chair, gesturing for the doctor to take her place beside the wingback chair. “Thank you, Doctor.”

Camden held his hand out for the doctor to examine. The older man nodded before taking a vial of clear liquid from his bag and pouring it over the wound. Camden hissed as the liquid stung his skin. The doctor then wrapped a thick bandage around his hand, securing it in place.

“You will need to keep the wound bandaged for at least a week,” the doctor said. “Change it once a day. And try not to use that hand too much. It needs time to heal.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Camden said, flexing his fingers experimentally. The pain had lessened considerably, and he was thankful for the doctor’s expertise.

As the doctor packed up his bag and left the room, Rebecca moved to stand in front of Camden. “I will come calling to change the bandage,” she said firmly.

Camden raised an eyebrow in surprise. “I am not sure that is necessary, Rebecca. I can manage on my own.”

“You will allow my help,” she repeated, her voice leaving no room for argument. “It is the least I can do.”

Camden couldn’t help but feel a surge of affection for her. She was stubborn, but she cared deeply for those around her. “As you wish.” Camden nodded. He could feel her fingers brush against his shoulder as she moved around him. He closed his eyes briefly, savoring the sensation. It was intoxicating to be this close to her, to feel her presence and know that she cared for him.

“Go home and rest. I will come to tend you tomorrow, and each day after for the prescribed sennight,” she said.

And for the first time in his life, he found himself grateful for being injured. The next seven days would be his chance to win her, and he would do all in his power to succeed.

Ten



Rebecca arrived at the ancient stone walls of Almerry Castle as the late afternoon sun washed over the countryside, casting an ethereal glow upon the aged façade. In her hands, she carried a small wicker basket filled with fresh linens and medicinal supplies, a new bandage nestled atop the bundles of herbs and tinctures.

With care, she made her way up the winding stone steps and through the towering oaken doors, the flickering light of candles guiding her path down the dimly lit corridors. Her soft footfalls echoed off the cold floors as she walked, taking in the Gothic arches and worn tapestries that lined the halls, remnants of ages long forgotten.

At last, she came to the solar where Camden rested, easing open the heavy door with care. Still as stone, Camden rested upon a worn settee, though Rebecca could see the slow rise and fall of his chest, catching the faintest hint of a snore carried in the musty air.

“Captain Beauchamp,” she called softly. Camden stirred then, blinking awake as if rising from a dream. He turned his head toward the sound of her voice, surprise flitting across his features for a moment before he came fully alert.

“Must we be so formal?” he rasped, voice gravelly from sleep. “I would rather like to hear my name on your lips.”

“Very well.” Rebecca smiled warmly, lifting the basket in her hands. “I’ve come to tend to your wound, Camden.”

His eyes dropped to the fresh bandages peeking from her basket, and he nodded. “Your kindness knows no bounds.”

“Rest easy,” Rebecca replied gently. “I will not cause you unnecessary discomfort.”

She moved to his side, laying out her supplies as she prepared to dress his injury once more. With delicate care, she unwound the old bandages, inspecting the healing gash upon the back of his hand, her touch soothing as a balm. Camden watched her silently, struck by the compassion in her eyes. The early sparks of love that had blossomed deep within him grew more profound.

Rebecca worked methodically yet gently as she cleaned the wound, her ministrations both practical and comforting. She studied her face, appreciating the furrow of concentration upon her brow, the purse of her lips as she focused on her task.

“Does it pain you still?” Rebecca asked, glancing up to meet his gaze.

Camden flexed his fingers slowly. “The ache has dulled, thanks to your excellent care. I’m in your debt, Rebecca.”

A pretty blush colored her cheeks at his words. She busied herself unwinding a fresh bandage, though a small smile played at her lips.

“I’m happy to be of service,” she replied. “For it is I who am in your debt.”

Camden nodded, touched by her selflessness. They sat in companionable silence for a moment as Rebecca wrapped the clean cloth around his palm. Her nearness was soothing, her touch kindling a warmth within him.

When she had finished, Rebecca met his eyes once more. “There. Good as new.”

“Good as new,” Camden echoed with a smile. He flexed his hand experimentally. “Thank you for your kindness.”

Rebecca’s gaze was tender. “Seeing you properly cared for is thanks enough. After what you did for my family... Well, I

cannot very well allow your wound to turn putrid. You have earned my loyalty.”

Rebecca’s words hung in the air between them, both affected by the intimacy of the moment.

Camden cleared his throat, breaking the spell. “Forgive me, I shouldn’t keep you. I’m sure you have other things to attend to.”

“None so pressing as this,” Rebecca replied gently. She hesitated, then asked, “If I may...what led you to become a soldier?”

Camden tensed, old grief rising along with the fear of pushing her away. But Rebecca’s expression held only compassion. Perhaps she was ready to look past his profession. Slowly, haltingly, he spoke of why he purchased a commission and of the bloodshed he had witnessed, the friends lost, the horrors of war that haunted his dreams.

Rebecca sat beside him and listened in silence, her hand coming to rest lightly atop his uninjured one. The warmth of her touch kept Camden grounded as he unburdened his soul. By the time his words trailed off, he felt strangely cleansed, as if lancing a wound to let it drain.

Rebecca gave his hand a gentle squeeze. “You have endured much,” she said softly. “But you are home now and the war is at an end. The past cannot hurt you here.”

Camden turned his hand beneath hers, lacing their fingers together. “You give me hope,” he admitted.

“Despite my obvious aversion to soldiers and all things military?” Rebecca’s lips curved. “I am quite certain I have been unfair to you.”

They smiled at one another, hands entwined, as the shadows retreated and light filled the room once more.

Rebecca let the moment linger, taking comfort in the connection between them. There would be time later to consider what it meant. For now, she was simply grateful to provide Camden with a measure of peace.

“I should go.” Reluctantly, she withdrew her hand. “Do accept my apologies for my early treatment of you. It is not you personally that I disliked. It is the soldier aspect. The war took my brother’s life. I have seen the lasting devastation wrought on Lady Daphne and my nephew—on my entire family.” She stood, then added, “I am certain you do not care to hear my reasons.”

“I’m interested in anything you wish to share,” Camden said sincerely. “I value the time we spend together and find myself longing to hear a story.”

Rebecca studied him for a long moment before nodding slowly. She retook her seat next to him. “Very well. I’ll tell you of my brother Roland, and the mischief Phoebe, Roland, and I got up to as children.”

Settling back in her chair, she began spinning tales of her childhood, bringing the memories vividly to life. Camden listened, enraptured by her voice and the sparkle in her eyes, as she recounted their adventures. For the first time since leaving the battlefield, he felt a lightness in his spirit that had nothing to do with physical healing.

Rebecca’s eyes danced with amusement as she recalled one particular escapade.

“It was high summer, the air heavy with the scent of honeysuckle. Phoebe, Roland and I were restless, eager for adventure. We decided to explore the old gamekeeper’s cottage deep in the woods.”

She leaned forward conspiratorially. “It was rumored to be haunted, you see. By a ghostly white stag.”

Camden raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “A white stag?”

“Oh yes. Some said it was the spirit of the old gamekeeper, forever guarding his domain.” Rebecca’s voice dropped to a dramatic whisper. “We simply had to investigate.”

“Naturally,” Camden replied, lips quirking.

“We crept through the trees, jumping at every snapped twig and rustle of leaves. The cottage loomed ahead, vines crawling up its crumbling walls. It was perfect.”

Rebecca's eyes shone with remembered excitement. "Phoebe wanted to turn back, but I urged us on. Brave Roland pushed open the door..."

She trailed off intentionally, enjoying the suspense. Camden leaned toward her. "What happened next?"

Rebecca laughed. "Why, nothing! Just dust and cobwebs. No ghostly stag. No ghosts of any kind."

Camden chuckled, relaxing back against the settee. Her laughter was contagious, washing away his lingering darkness. With a pang, he realized how much he would miss her if he left.

Rebecca's laughter faded, and she glanced up, meeting his gaze. In his eyes she saw past and present intertwined—the shadowed soldier who fought in the war, and the man he was beyond the battlefield. A man who might be capable of leaving the darkness and foolishness of death and destruction behind. She cared about him—deeply. Her heart tugged, her throat growing tight at the realization.

Camden saw a battle raging in her eyes, a secret struggle she would not share with him. Heartache, surprise, tenderness. He saw it all in the green depths of her gaze.

The moment stretched between them, fragile as a moth's wing. In those quiet moments, he had his own realization. Here was something worth fighting for. Worth protecting.

The candlelight flickered, dancing across their features. Rebecca's cheeks were tinged pink. Slowly, reluctantly, she withdrew her hand. The loss of her touch left an ache.

"I should take my leave," she murmured. Her voice was gentle, almost wistful. She busied herself gathering up her basket.

Camden longed to call her back, but held his tongue. There would be time ahead to explore what lay between them. For now, it was enough to watch her go, her footsteps echoing down the ancient stone corridors.

When she had disappeared from view, Camden let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. He flexed his

bandaged hand, imprinting the memory of her touch. Tomorrow they would meet again.

Rebecca's footsteps slowed as she made her way down the winding staircase, each step taking her further from Camden. She chided herself for lingering so long in his presence, for allowing herself to get drawn in by the intensity of his gaze.

And yet... she could not deny the connection that had sparked between them from the very beginning. It both thrilled and frightened her in equal measure.

Pausing on the landing, Rebecca glanced back over her shoulder, half hoping to see Camden there. But the corridor behind her remained empty.

She sighed, adjusting the basket on her arm. Best to return home and put the encounter from her mind. She could never find happiness as a soldier's wife.

Even as she told herself this, Rebecca knew she would count the hours until she had cause to return to Almerry Castle. To see him again.

The ancient oak door creaked open before her. Beyond lay the sweeping lawn of the bailey, bathed now in the fading golden light of dusk.

Rebecca stepped out into the fresh air, breathing deep the scent of roses on the breeze. Somewhere nearby a skylark burst into joyful song, its trilling melody reminding her that life held brightness still, even amidst the aftermath of war and grief. Then, with a lighter heart, Rebecca made her way home.

Eleven



Camden watched Rebecca intently as she gently unwound the bandage from his injured hand. Just as it was in the previous three days, her touch was soft and soothing, her fingers deftly working to avoid causing him any pain. Though he knew he was more than capable, Camden was glad it was Rebecca tending to him.

“It seems to be healing well,” Rebecca said, inspecting the nearly closed gash on his palm.

He nodded as she wrapped a fresh linen strip around his palm. He liked the way she fussed over him, but mostly he enjoyed spending time alone with her. During her visits, he’d told her about his brother and parents, his childhood. In return, she’d told him more about her childhood and her family.

He still attended the house party, but enjoyed the time they spent at Almerry most of all. Aside from her chaperone, they were alone in the castle. At her estate, there seemed to always be several people about, making it difficult for them to be their authentic selves.

“Soon you will have no need of bandages,” she said.

He glanced up, his gaze fixating on her plump pink lips. How he longed to possess them. He swallowed hard, then said, “All thanks to your tender care.”

Her cheeks tinted.

The sight of her blushing so prettily caused a surge of desire to course through him. He’d not kissed her since that day in the storage room. Not that the opportunity had not

presented itself, but he wished to form a true bond with her. One that centered around more than passion. He wanted to be her friend, her confidant, her safe place. Bloody hell, he wanted to be her...everything.

The curiosity and desire he experienced in their earlier interactions had changed into something more, something stronger. Rebecca had captured his heart, but did he hold hers as well?

“You should eat,” she said as she placed a plate of biscuits and jam in front of him. “We missed you at luncheon. Everyone asked after you. Even Daphne made an appearance at the table.”

“How does Lady Daphne fare?” Camden reached for a biscuit, then took a bite, relishing the sweet taste of blackberry jam. He chewed slowly, giving Rebecca time to answer his question.

“She makes no complaints, but it is plain to see her leg pains her. Every time she shifts her weight, her face contorts.” Rebecca placed a cup of tea on the makeshift table in front of him. “Mother still tries to get Daphne to take the laudanum left by the surgeon, but she refuses. Says she’d rather feel a little discomfort than have her mind foggy.”

He nodded in understanding as he swallowed down the last bite of his biscuit. Camden could sympathize with Lady Daphne’s reluctance to take the drug. He had seen far too many lives ruined by laudanum. Fellow soldiers who became addicted to laudanum after being injured in battle. Many turned to opium, losing their lives in an entirely different way. Not that he thought Lady Daphne would suffer such an outcome. Still, he commanded her strength of will and refusal.

“I do not fault her for thinking in such a way. Laudanum is powerful stuff. I would refuse the drug as well,” he said.

Rebecca poured him a cup of tea and handed it to him, her fingers brushing against his as she did so. “That may be true, but I think her foolish for suffering when she need not.” Rebecca strolled across the entry hall to the trunk. “I wish there were something I could do to lessen her burden. I spend

time with her each day, read to her and tell her stories about Almerry's legend. Mother, Phoebe, and I take turns keeping her company."

Camden rose and moved to her side. "I am certain she appreciates your efforts, as do I."

She crouched down, tracing the trunk's carved scroll with her fingertips. "I do not tend your wound for appreciation, but thank you all the same."

Camden studied the trunk, his eyes narrowed as he wondered at the contents. He still wished to know what secrets it held. "Do you ever intend to inspect the contents?"

She glanced up at him through thick lashes, her lower lip caught between her teeth. "I have considered it."

"You could do so today." He crouched next to her. "We could do it together."

She grinned, mischief lighting her green eyes. "The suspense is too much for you, isn't it?" Her smile grew, lighting her eyes. "You are like a lad at Christmas, so impatient that you can not sleep." She met his gaze and pursed her lips. "You've probably already looked."

Camden shook his head, amusement dancing in his eyes. "I most certainly have not." He crossed his arms over his broad chest. "But I may soon if you do not end the suspense."

Rebecca laughed again and looked at him playfully. She reached out to lift the lid of the trunk a few inches, then lowered it back into place with a dramatic flourish. Her laughter filled the room.

He couldn't help but laugh as well at her antics, admiring her mischief and wit more than ever. His body yearned for her, heat pulsing through him like an electric current every time she touched him or met his gaze with her own mischievous one. Camden cleared his throat and tried to focus on the task at hand, lest he give in to temptation and kiss her sweet lips right then and there.

"You, my lady, are a terrible tease," he said, chuckling as he placed his hand on top of hers. "Shall we open it together?"

She sobered, her gaze searching his. “If you truly wish to know, I will empty it for you.”

“I only jest. The trunk belongs to you. I care not when or even if you remove its contents.” He rubbed his thumb in lazy circles over her hand before reluctantly releasing it and stepping away from her.

Even through her glove, she could feel the warmth radiating from his touch, sending waves of heat up and down her arm. She shivered slightly at the sensation before turning away from him and toward the trunk once more.

“Very well then,” she said with a deep breath, hoping it would steady her racing heart as much as calm her racing mind. “It shall remain a mystery, leastwise for now.”

He searched Rebecca’s beautiful face. “You had better get home and ready yourself for the ball. I shall be devastated if you miss our dance.” He stood, offering his arm to her. “Allow me to show you out.”

“Oh, how you tease.” She rested her fingertips on his coat sleeve.

He smiled. His words were meant to tease, but they held the truth as well. Tonight would be a special night for them, and he had no wish for his plans to be delayed.

He led her to the large arched door and placed a kiss on the back of her hand. “Until tonight, my lady.” He winked.

Twelve



Rebecca stood with Phoebe near a potted fern at the back of the ballroom. Most of the guests had already spilled into the space. Ladies and gentlemen stood in every corner, fanning out along the walls of the candlelit room as they waited for Mother and Father to open the floor for dancing.

Still, Camden had not appeared. Her stomach tightened as she stared at the entrance. What could be keeping him? He had seemed eager this afternoon, and gave every indication that he would not miss their dance.

“Is something bothering you?” Phoebe asked, worry lines etched her brow.

“No.” Rebecca glanced at Phoebe, then quickly back to the door. Camden would arrive any minute, and she did not want to miss his entrance. Everything was fine. She was sure of it.

“Are you quite certain? You acted a bit strange all afternoon, and now you seem very distracted,” Phoebe said as rested her hand on Rebecca’s arm.

“I am merely anxious to see this house party draw to an end.” Rebecca flipped open her fan. Had the air warmed suddenly? She fanned herself as she said, “The past fortnight has been grueling. I long for everyone to take their leave.”

“Will you be saddened by Captain Beauchamp’s departure?”

Rebecca’s chest tightened, and she had the sudden realization that she no longer wished for him to leave. She

sighed, her gaze still on the door. “I do not know that he plans to leave. He has said nothing of the sort to me.”

“But surely you know he must wish to. He cannot stay in that decrepit castle forever.”

“Almerry is not decrepit. He has been working to restore it and plans to return it to its former splendor.”

Camden swept into the room and Rebecca swallowed hard, a lump forming in her throat. She’d enjoyed their time together so much she’d allowed herself to ignore that he was a soldier.

There was no ignoring the fact now.

He wore his full dress uniform, and though he looked breathtakingly handsome in the white breeches and red coat decorated with intricate gold designs, it reminded her how ill suited they were. Nonetheless, she felt pulled toward him.

She glanced at Phoebe. “If you will excuse me, I promised Captain Beauchamp the first set.”

“By all means.” Phoebe grinned, opening her fan with a flip of her wrist. “Do not keep him waiting.”

Rebecca pushed away her trepidation and made her way toward Camden. She would enjoy this night, even if tomorrow promised heartache. Tomorrow she would end their courtship. She wished things were different, but she could no more change the fact that he was a soldier than she could bring Roland back from the grave. It mattered not that she’d come to care for Camden—to love him—they could never make a match.

She’d been a fool for taking Phoebe’s advice when she had known from the start there was no future for her and Camden. It was a dangerous game and she never should have indulged it. But did she ever have a choice? Camden attended the house party and currently resided next-door. It was not as if she could have hid from him.

She would not—could not—think on it tonight.

As the quartet struck the first cords of a country-dance, she met Camden’s eyes and gave a brilliant smile.

“My lady.” Camden bowed before he offered his arm. “I believe this is our dance.”

Rebecca curtsied. “Captain Beauchamp, I believe you are right.” She rested her fingers on his sleeve before glancing at the dance floor to where her parents stood. “I also believe you are late.” She ignored the familiar flutter of her stomach at his touch.

“Nonsense, I am right on time.” He swept her onto the dance floor, where they took their positions in line.

The music started, and she curtsied while he bowed. He caught her gaze as they swept past each other and offered a wink. Heat scorched her cheeks. She glanced around as she made her turn. Heaven forbid anyone noticed his flirtatious actions. When she swept past him, the second time, she gave him a scowl. “Behave yourself.”

He grinned at her from across the floor. Blast her body for it warm at the sight. And her fool heart—the blasted thing soared. She averted her gaze to her mother and father. They danced by, light on their feet and grinning at each other. Once they had passed, Rebecca and Camden came together. She placed her hands in his with a furtive glance. He led her down the line, mischief dancing in his eyes.

Camden led her through the rest of the dance in silence. Rebecca’s heart thumped as she took Camden’s arm, allowing him to guide her from the floor.

“That was exhilarating. Will you join me for a stroll out of doors?” He led her toward the large doors at the rear of the ballroom. “It is stifling in here.”

“What about our second dance? We will miss it,” she protested.

“I would prefer to have you alone.” He brought his hand to rest over hers, giving a gentle squeeze.

Her cheeks blazed at the public show of affection. “What if someone notices our absence?”

“I have taken care to ensure your reputation remains intact. A chaperone awaits us.” He nodded at the elderly lady

stationed by the doors.

She sighed, wishing she could argue further. However, the lady was a widow and would make a perfectly suitable chaperone. “Very well. Some fresh air sounds appealing,” Rebecca conceded. She took some comfort in the fact there would be a breeze to cool her burning skin.

He led her across the threshold and out into the open night air. She glanced over her shoulder to ensure the elderly lady followed. “Will you be departing for London on the morrow?”

“I wish to speak to you about that very matter.” He turned her toward a path where torches cast their warm glow on the hedgerow.

The implications made her throat tighten. She did not want him to leave, but things would be easier if he did. The sooner he left, the sooner their hearts could heal. Tears welled in her eyes. She blinked against them, refusing to show weakness.

He brought them to a stop near a torch and turned to her. His eyes shone in the firelight as he took her hand in his. “Lady Rebecca, I have grown very fond of you during our brief acquaintance, and I believe you feel the same for me.”

The tenderness in his gaze coupled with his actions alarmed her. She pulled her hand back, but he held tight.

“Dare I say love has blossomed between us?” he stroked his thumb over her hand as he spoke.

She wanted to shake her head, deny his words. Her heart demanded she confess her love, while her mind screamed at her to deny loving him. She opened her mouth to speak, but her tongue refused to cooperate.

“For my part, I have no doubts. Somewhere along the way you took my heart captive.” He lowered to one knee. “You are the woman I love. The woman I wish to grow old with. To laugh with. To raise a family with. Marry me, Lady Rebecca Chesterfield, and I vow to love you always.”

An agonizing tightness clenched her chest. Her eyes stung as the cruel truth slammed into her. She did love him. More than she ever thought a woman could love a man. But was

love enough? It had not done Daphne any favors. Rebecca could not put herself in the same position, no matter how much she loved Camden.

Her heart may never recover, but at least she could spare herself further heartache by ending this now. She could ensure her life did not turn out like Daphne's, and mayhap in time she would love another. God willing, Camden would as well.

"Rebecca, I am asking for your hand." The warmth in his eyes nearly felled her. "Have you nothing to say?"

She averted her gaze, swallowed past the lump in her throat. Her chaperone stood back at the entry to the path, speaking with another guest. "I...I cannot marry you." She drew in a breath and said, "I am sorry, Captain Beauchamp. I cannot."

"I understand your fears." He rose to his feet, pulling her against him, locking his arms around her. "But you are not a coward, Rebecca. We can face them together."

For a moment, she melted into his embrace before stiffening and pulling away. "I shall not, can not, become a soldier's wife. It leads to too much heartbreak." One lone tear slipped from the corner of her eye and glided hotly down her cheek. Her heart shattered as she forced herself to say the words, "I do not love you."

The dark flash in his eyes was her only warning. He bent his head, slanted his lips across hers. She kissed him back freely, giving fully of herself. One last kiss she would hold deep in her heart for the rest of her days.

When he pulled back, she dragged her gaze to his. "Good bye, Captain Beauchamp." She twisted in his grip and he released his hold on her. With haste, she set off down the path.

"Your kiss betrays you, Rebecca," he called after her. "You are lying to me, and perhaps even to yourself."

His words arrowed through her, and she froze in place. She needed to make him hate her so he would take his leave without further issue. So he would move on and find love with a more suitable lady. With a ragged breath, she stiffened her

spine, squaring her shoulders. “My kiss contained nothing more than lust. I assure you, I could never love you.”

He peered at her, his face burning. “You would rather call yourself a harlot than admit to your feelings for me?”

“I have no feelings for you. I have kissed many a gentleman with the same passion as I have kissed you.” She gathered her skirt in both hands and ran.

Thirteen



Rebecca threw herself onto the bed and buried her face in the pillow. Her shoulders trembled as she allowed her tears to break free. Never had she felt so dreadful. She'd hurt a good man merely because she could not stomach his profession. It was horrible of her and she knew it, but to marry him would only lead to further harm. She could never support his career. Never understand his desire to be a soldier. She would live in fear of the day he got called to fight and he would grow to hate her.

She made the only decision she could, so why did it devastate her so? She rolled onto her side, facing the window, and pulled her knees close to her abdomen. She had to love him enough to let him go. Still, she feared she would always wonder and worry about him.

What was he doing now? Was he still angry? Or had anger given way to sorrow? Had Camden returned to Almerry or chosen to brave the remainder of the ball? Nausea swept through her as she replayed their conversation in her mind. His devastated look out in the garden stole her breath, sending a stab of pain straight through her heart.

Startled, Rebecca jumped as someone touched her shoulder. Rolling over, she found Daphne propped up on a crutch, staring down at her. She wiped the tears from her face and scrambled to sit upright. "You should be resting."

"And you should be dancing." Daphne stared at Rebecca, her gaze sympathetic and worried. "Scoot over and let me in."

Rebecca slid across the bed, making room for Daphne to settle in beside her.

Once situated, Daphne cast a warm smile at her. “Now tell me, what troubles you?”

“Captain Beauchamp proposed to me.” She pulled a handful of her coverlet close to her cheek.

Daphne grinned. “That should be wonderful news. Why are you up here crying instead of downstairs celebrating?”

“I turned him away.” Rebecca sniffled and dashed a fresh tear from her cheek.

Daphne’s brow furrowed. “Whatever for? Captain Beauchamp is a fine catch. A war hero and a gentleman.”

“I cannot marry a soldier. I am sorry, Daphne, but I have no desire to become a young widow.” A fresh batch of sobs racked Rebecca’s body. “Look how you wound up. Alone with a baby.”

“Hush now.” Daphne pulled Rebecca close. “I would become a young widow over and over again if it meant a life with the man I loved. And I am not alone. I have my son and you and Phoebe and your parents.”

“How can you say such a thing? Roland has been gone for nearly two years and you still cry yourself to sleep most nights.” Rebecca glanced up, ignoring the tears streaming down her cheeks. “I can hear you through the wall.”

“I will not deny my sorrow.” Daphne took Rebecca’s hand in hers. “However, I do not grieve over Roland’s death; I grieve over the loss of his presence.”

Rebecca looked up at Daphne, confused. “You speak in riddles.”

“I merely mean I grieved him in life as well. Anytime we were separated, my heart ached for him because I loved him.” Daphne squeezed Rebecca’s hand. “I still do. You cannot run from love. The only cure for your suffering is Captain Beauchamp.”

Rebecca closed her eyes, her mind spinning.

“I would choose Roland time and again if given the opportunity, despite knowing how things ended for us. A thousand deaths would not sway me, for the time we had together was full of love and happiness. I would never give up a moment I spent with him. Not for any reason.”

Rebecca groaned and pulled the coverlet over her face. Daphne’s words filled her head. Half of her wanted to cling to a life free of heartbreak, while the other longed for the life Daphne’s words implied—a life with Captain Camden Beauchamp.

Should she go to Camden? Tell him what a fool she’d been, or stay the course and hope the pain would pass? “Daphne, I don’t know what to do,” Rebecca sobbed.

Daphne tugged the coverlet back down, pinning Rebecca with her gaze. “Let me ask you this. Is it possible for you to hurt more than you do right now?”

“Yes... No... I...” Rebecca shook her head. “My heart is broken.”

Daphne’s voice was quiet, but her words held weight. “Then what do you have to lose?” she asked.

Rebecca considered Daphne’s words for a long moment. Seeing the reason in them, she said, “Nothing.” She dried her tears, then moved from the bed to stand at the window. “I have nothing to lose. Thank you for making me understand, Daphne. For helping me see reason.”

Rebecca’s gaze shifted to the flickering light coming from the castle’s lancet window. The castle where Camden had first kissed her. Where he had given her the most wonderful gift she had ever received. The place where they had first meet and where they had come to know each other. Where they had fallen in love. Her heart swelled until her emotions were nearly too big to contain. She spun to her sister-in-law and said, “I must go to him.”

Daphne beamed at her, a joyous smile stretching across her face. “Good. Now go make things right for both of you. I will stay here in case anyone should come looking.”

Rebecca dashed across the chamber, coming to a halt at her bedroom door. "Thank you, Daphne."

"Off with you," Daphne said as she waved her out. "Go before you get found out."

Rebecca raced from the room and toward Almerry. As she ran, she prayed Camden would forgive her. Prayed he would welcome her with open arms.

What a fool she'd been.

Everything seemed pointedly clear to Rebecca as she rode at a full gallop toward the looming gatehouse of Almerry. Her heart raced, keeping beat with the horse's thundering hooves. She'd not blame him if he hated her; it would be her own fault. Still, she prayed he would welcome her back into his life.

She pulled her mount's reins next to the stairs leading to the second-story entry and slid from her saddle. Her fingers fumbled, slipping from the leather reins as she tried to tie them to a nearby post. After long moments of frustration, she managed the semblance of a knot. She took the steps two at a time, her skirts hiked up to her knees before pounding on the massive arched door, her heartbeat keeping time with the pounding of her fists.

When no answer came, she pushed the heavy door open. With her heart in her throat, she raced across the entry hall. "Camden! Camden!" She yelled as she made her way up to the third floor. Her chest heaved with the exertion. She paused for a moment, gasping for breath.

"Camden, where are you?" She called out, her voice echoing through the keep. Slivers of moonlight spilled through the lancet windows, lighting her path as she stepped into the master chamber. A makeshift bed sat along the far wall, but Camden did not lie upon it. She glanced around the room. There were no signs anyone occupied the room. She made her way to the next chamber, and her heart plummeted. Empty. Had he left Almerry? "Camden, I was wrong. I'm sorry." Her voice bounced off the walls, echoing back to her.

She ran from room to room, floor to floor. There was no sign Camden had stayed here. Not a stitch of clothing or scrap of parchment anywhere to be found. Not even a servant answered her pleas. Finally, out of breath and back in the entrance hall, she sank onto the floor, clutching her knees. A fresh batch of tears pricked at her eyes as she rocked back and forth. She was too late. Blast her foolishness. He'd taken his possessions and gone. Now she would never get the chance to tell him how she really felt. Never feel his arms around her again. Her heart shattered anew as tears spilled from her eyes.

The cool floor chilled her bones, but she did not care to move. Instead, she pressed her eyes shut against the pain she'd caused. How had she allowed herself to be so foolish? She rolled onto her back, stared up at the ancient ceiling. Her chest rose and fell at a rapid pace as she fought to gain control of her emotions.

She pushed herself up from the floor, straightened her gown, and dusted her skirts off. He could not have gotten far in so short a time. She'd go after him. Surely he rode for London. How hard could he be to find? She drew in a deep breath against the pounding of her heart. She had to tell him how wrong she was.

Fourteen



Camden pushed his horse hard to escape Almerry and its memories of Rebecca. The clop-clop-clop of hooves and Camden's heavy breathing intermingle with the sound of the wind, the rustling trees, and the occasional howl of a night animal.

The cloying bile of regret, and the startling clarity of pain, were his companions. He rode hard, desperate to put more distance between them. He glanced up at the night sky rushing past in streaks of starlight.

His heart squeezed. What was Rebecca doing now? Did her heart bleed as his did? Her words had stung like a well-placed slap, burning a trail through him that incinerated his heart.

He knew she did not mean them, but the knowledge did nothing to lessen their impact. Rebecca might just as well have pierced his heart with a dagger. But why?

The answer slammed into him. She was afraid and lashed out to protect herself. He drew in a deep breath and slowed his mount, her words replaying through his mind. "I shall not become a soldier's wife." He blinked against the memory. "My brother Roland was killed in battle." His pulse sped.

How had he failed to see it before? She was afraid of losing him to war—afraid of becoming a widow like Daphne, left behind to raise a child on her own. What could he say to change her mind? Was it even possible to make her see past

her fears? He tapped his fingers against his thigh, contemplating.

He'd served bravely and the British Army had licked Napoleon. There was no longer any danger of battle. Certainly Rebecca knew the war had come to an end, and yet she still feared being wed to him, to a soldier. He had to turn back. Camden could not give up on her or their love. He had to change her mind. Soothe her fears.

His pulse sped as he tugged the reins, the horse jerking beneath him to change direction. With a firm hand, he pushed the stallion into a gallop. He would not give up on Rebecca and the future he dreamed of.

Camden rode back through the night, a strange mixture of dread and hope lacing his veins. He prayed that in the morning light Rebecca would have changed her mind, but knew it was wishful thinking. Her fear was too deeply rooted in the loss of her brother.

Still, he could not picture the rest of his life without her beside him. He had to fight for her and he would. She had done her best to put up a strong front back at the ball, but he'd seen the truth in the depths of her eyes. Her words had laid waste to her heart, just as they'd done to his. Rebecca loved him, and that was worth everything.

Captain Camden Beauchamp did not shy away from a challenge. Resolve stiffened his spine. He had never in his life run away from battle and he'd not start now. He snapped the reins, pushing his horse faster.

Nearly halfway back to the castle, he caught sight of another rider. He peered into the distance as the rider guided their mount off the side of the road. Instinct took over as he retrieved his pistol from the saddle holster. He neared the spot where the rider had disappeared with caution, his gaze trained on the roadside. With a steady hand, he stopped his mount, aiming his pistol into the blackness of night. "Show yourself or I'll shoot."

For a long moment, nothing happened. Then a figure emerged from the shadows. A prickle of recognition raced

through him before she came fully into view. He jumped from his saddle, pistol still in hand. “Are you mad? Do you not know the dangers of traveling at night? Alone?” He tucked the gun into his coat and reached for Rebecca, running his hands across her shoulders, down her arms. “Are you hurt?”

“No. I came to tell you how sorry I am for the things I said.”

He narrowed his gaze at her, not entirely sure what she was about. Afraid to hope, determined to have her.

She placed her hands on his cheeks and stared into his eyes. “I came to tell you I love you.”

His heart hammered in his chest, and tears welled in her eyes. He knew the truth of it before she spoke the words. Even so, hearing them meant more than he ever could have imagined.

He moved forward, taking her in his arms, burying his face in her hair, breathing in the scent of jasmine and rose that clung to her. He felt her body shaking against him as he pulled away and their gazes locked once more.

But then a thought occurred to him, and he stepped back, breaking free from her embrace. “But you cannot marry me because I am a soldier.” He studied her gaze as he spoke, watching for any reluctance or fear in her expression as she responded.

“What if I were no longer in the army?” he asked.

The moment hung between them like a bridge to something new, and Rebecca’s lips curved into a small smile that warmed Camden’s heart through the chill of the night air.

She reached for him again. “Did you hear me? I said I love you.” Rebecca rested her hands on either side of his face while standing on tiptoes to meet him eye-to-eye with determination written across every inch of her delicate features. “I do not care about your profession; I love you, Captain Camden Beauchamp, and I want to spend my life with you.”

His heart soared as he stared deep into her eyes, searching her soul. “Say it again,” he urged, desperate to hear her repeat

the words.

“I want to be your wife,” she said as she looked up, peeking at him through thick lashes. “If you will still have me.”

Camden looked down at Rebecca, his heart beating fast with joy. He smiled and brushed a stray lock of hair from her forehead. “I want to be your husband,” he whispered, his voice low and gruff with emotion.

Rebecca shifted in his arms and met his gaze with a shy smile. “Then you will still have me?”

“I will always choose you,” he said, sweeping her into his arms and spinning her in a circle, before sitting her feet back on the ground. “Yes, I will have you,” he declared, laughing as he said it. “I will sell my commission, and once it is done, we will wed.” He grinned down at her as he stroked her back in slow circles, as if trying to soothe away any hesitation in her mind. “I want to make you happy for the rest of your days.” He pulled her close again, his arms around her waist as they swayed together beneath the star-filled night sky.

“I wish to make you happy and if being a soldier makes you happy, then I will support you in it.” She tucked herself against him, rested her head on his muscled chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat as she let out a contented sigh.

“Being your husband and master of Almerry will make me happy. Let’s go home,” Camden said softly into the darkness, “and start making plans for our future together.”

Rebecca hugged him close and said, “Camden.”

“Yes,” he replied, hugging her back.

“I was silly being so afraid. Foolish to let you go. I love you, and being a soldier is part of who you are. It’s your heritage. I would not change you.”

His chest swelled at her declaration. He lowered his head, capturing her soft lips. She wound her arms around him, pulling him close as she tilted her head, welcoming his kiss. Passion ignited between them, fierce and unyielding. The kiss

deepened, becoming a fiery conflagration that consumed them both.

Camden pulled back, his dark eyes ablaze with emotion. He stroked her hair and whispered, "I promise to always cherish you. To always protect you and keep you safe. To love you until my dying breath."

Rebecca looked up at him with her brown eyes shining with love and trust. "I believe you, and make you the same promises," she said, her voice breaking with emotion.

Camden cupped her face in his hands and kissed her forehead. "Let's go home and start our life together," he said, and with that, they mounted their horses and rode back to the castle. A new chapter in their lives had just begun, and they were ready to face it together.

Chapter 15



Three weeks later...

Rebecca's heart beat with joy as she and Camden watched the last of their wedding guests walk through the ancient gatehouse. They clung to each other, her palm flat against his chest. The chill midmorning breeze ruffled Rebecca's skirts, but its coldness was lost on her as she stood in the bailey of Almerry Castle, surrounded by lush, fragrant gardens teeming with vibrant pink and yellow blooms. Her parents, sister, and Daphne, along with Camden's parents and brother, waved their fair wells, smiling approvingly as the newly married couple basked in the sheer delight of being together. Behind them, the keep rose up to guard them like a sentinel for all eternity.

She gazed up into Camden's eyes after the last of the carriages disappeared from sight. "I have a gift for you, husband." Her heart fluttered with anticipation and she gave him a glowing smile.

"You have already given me the best gift imaginable." He dropped a kiss on her forehead, then swept her into his arms, cradling her body close to his.

She laid her head against his chest as he carried her up the stairs, past their borrowed butler, and into Almerry's entry hall. She knew that tomorrow he would take her away on an adventure for their honeymoon, but tonight they were here within the castle walls, and she meant to enjoy every moment.

Overcome with joy, she closed her eyes and let out a gentle sigh. Opening them, she met his gaze and said, "I would like very much to see what is concealed within the old trunk."

He stopped walking and gave her his full attention. "Are you certain?" he asked.

"Yes. And once we know what it holds, I wish for you to make love to me." Her cheeks burned at the admission.

"I cannot imagine what I did to deserve such a perfect woman as my wife." He brought his lips to hers, kissing her soundly before lowering her to her feet. "But for the rest of my days, I shall strive to deserve you."

"And I you." She stood on her toes, pressing her lips against his in a gentle kiss. "Now let us see what treasures the trunk holds."

He knelt beside her and together they lifted the lid. She met his eyes before reaching in to run her slender fingers slowly over the soft red fabric. Biting her bottom lip, she carefully pulled it from the ancient oak trunk and held it up for a better look. "It's a gown," she whispered in awe as she spread it out on the ground between them.

"A medieval kirtle." He said, studying her movements with a mischievous twinkle in his blue eyes. "And chain mail." He lifted out the heavy garments of iron links.

"Do you suppose they belonged to Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel?" She whispered, her voice filled with wonder.

"It is possible. They appear old enough to have belonged to them." He fiddled with the chain mail, inspecting the iron links.

Rebecca's eyes lit up as she lifted a man's tunic and hose out of the trunk. The fabric was soft, a deep blue with intricate gold embroidery adorning the edges. She raised it to her face, letting its scent linger in her nose before carefully laying it down on the floor. "I would like to think they do," she smiled, "that your ancestors left behind more than just their great love story and legacy of battle."

"Ah, my darling, that is where you are wrong."

She turned to him, one brow arched in question. “Wrong how?” she asked.

“It is a legacy of love they left behind. For it was love that conquered their hearts, bringing them together despite the battle they waged between them.”

“Love’s legacy.” She turned his words over in her mind. One corner of her mouth lifted in a half smile as she met his gaze. “A promise of everlasting passion. I like the sound of that.” She leaned forward, peering into the trunk. A metal box remained inside, tucked into a corner of the large chest. Her pulse quickened. There was something inscribed on the top, but she couldn’t interpret what it said beneath the centuries of tarnish. She lifted it out and presented it to Camden. “Look, something is engraved on the top.”

He leaned closer, his fingertips barely brushing the engraved top. “Let me see it.” He looked up expectantly, and she handed it to him, the weight of it heavy in his palm. He rubbed his shirtsleeve across the inscription before tilting the box toward the candlelight. He squinted at the words etched into the tarnished silver. “It’s Latin, *Amor Vincit Omnia*.”

“Love conquers all.” She beamed at him, her eyes twinkling and a giddy excitement emanating from her.

He inclined his head, extending the box out to her. “Open it,” he said, his voice soft.

Her finger shook as she lifted the top to peer inside. A necklace rested on a bed of royal-blue fabric. A miniature painting of a couple hung from the chain. Her breath hitched as she stared at the raven-haired woman and blond-haired man, the carved stone hearth of the great hall behind them.

Camden sidled up next to her, his chin just above her shoulder as he studied the piece. He found it hard to pull his gaze away from the bobble. “It is them, Sir Ariston and Lady Isabel.”

Tears welled in her eyes as emotion overwhelmed her. “This is amazing.” She whispered, replacing the lid with care

before putting the box back into the chest. “It is like they meant for us to have it.”

Camden placed his hand on the side of her face and gently rubbed his thumb back and forth across her cheekbone. She closed her eyes and sighed contentedly at his touch.

He pulled away and looked into her eyes, his own full of love and adoration. “It pales in comparison to you, my wife,” he said softly as he pulled her into an embrace.

She smiled against his shoulder, melting into him as she wrapped her arms around him and kissed his neck lightly. His familiar smell made her heart skip a beat. This was where she belonged.

He pulled away just enough that he could look into her eyes again and searched them for assurance that she felt the same way about him as he did for her. Satisfied by what he saw there, he smiled down at her tenderly before whispering three words that filled both of them with an infinite amount of hope and joy, “I love you.”

“I love you too.” She clung to his shoulders, her heart pounding in anticipation as he scooped her up into the strength of his embrace.

Her heart raced as he carried her up a winding staircase to the second floor. At the top of the stairs, Camden paused before an oak door. “This was their home.” He turned to her, eyes glowing with devotion. “And now, my darling, it shall be ours.”

Rebecca held him tighter. “Our love will honor the legend they left for Almerry.”

He carried her over the threshold, the door creaking closed behind them. Tonight, in this hallowed place, they would craft their own memories of love eternal, joining hearts as Isabel and Ariston had so long ago.

Camden set her gently on her feet, his hands lingering at her waist. The firelight danced across his features, shadows caressing the sharp planes of his face. His eyes were soft with tenderness as he gazed down at her. “Rebecca, my love.” His

voice was a reverent whisper. “When I’m with you, I feel as though I’ve come home at long last. You are my heart, my breath, my everything.”

Tears stung her eyes at his heartfelt confession.

Camden cupped her cheek, his touch filled with longing. “Say you feel the same. Tell me I’m not alone in this love that threatens to consume me.”

She placed her hand over his, pressing into his caress. “You could never be alone in this, for I love you too, with everything I am.”

A ragged sigh escaped him as he gathered her close. “You cannot know how happy hearing those words from your lips makes me,” he murmured, his hand sliding into her hair. “How I have ached for you, my darling.”

“As I have ached for you, my husband,” she whispered.

The fire crackled, bathing them in its warm glow as they came together. Rebecca sighed into his mouth, her hands tangling in his hair to draw him closer still. His arms encircled her, holding her fast against him as they explored the sweetness of each other’s lips.

A spark ignited within her, spreading through her like liquid fire. She wanted nothing more than to lose herself in his embrace, to give herself over to the passion that threatened to consume them both.

Rebecca trembled as Camden’s hands trailed down her back, his touch both reverent and possessive. His fingers skimmed along the edge of her bodice, slipping underneath to caress her bare skin. She gasped at the intimacy, her heart racing as he slowly undid the laces of her gown.

The garment whispered to the floor, leaving her clad only in her shift. Camden’s eyes smoldered as he gazed upon her, as if he could see straight through to her soul. “So beautiful,” he breathed, brushing his knuckles down the curve of her neck.

Rebecca flushed under the intensity of his stare, aching for the feel of his hands on her once more. He granted her unspoken wish, sliding the thin straps of her shift off her

shoulders until the only thing left clinging to her body was his heated gaze.

She moved to undo the buttons of his waistcoat, her fingers trembling with excitement and clumsy with inexperience.

He stilled her hands, bringing them to his lips for a kiss. "Patience, my love." His voice was husky with restrained desire. "We have all the time in the world." He removed his coat and waistcoat with agonizing slowness, tantalizing her with each inch of skin he revealed. Rebecca bit her lip to stifle a moan, her body thrumming with a need she did not quite understand.

At last, he stood before her in all his masculine glory, sculpted muscle and tanned skin that glowed in the firelight. She dared to reach out and trace the lines of his chest and abdomen, delighting in the feel of him under her fingertips.

He eased her down onto the soft rug, arranging her hair like a halo around her head. "So beautiful," he whispered, awe etched into his handsome features.

Rebecca's heart swelled under the devotion in his gaze. She reached up to cup his cheek, thrilling at the rasp of stubble against her palm. "I love you, Camden Beauchamp. Now and forever."

Camden smiled as he turned his head to press a kiss into Rebecca's palm. "As I love you, Rebecca Beauchamp, now and always."

He moved lower, trailing kisses along her collarbone and down to her breasts. His tongue flicked out to tease the tight buds of her nipples before moving ever downward.

Rebecca gasped as Camden settled himself between her legs, stroking his fingers through the curls at the apex of her thighs before sinking one finger into her wet passage.

He teased and caressed until she was panting with need, his hands and mouth leading her to pleasures she could never have imagined. Allowing instinct to guide her, she moved against him, delighting in the new sensations he caused.

She ran her hands over his back and shoulders, feeling the muscles that moved and corded beneath his skin. The hard planes brushed against her palms as he continued to stoke the fire within her. Her desire for him become almost unbearable, and she cried out, "Please," thrusting her hips against him, searching for relief.

He lowered himself over her, bracing his weight on his forearms. She welcomed him into her embrace, glorying in the feel of his heated skin against hers. Their kisses deepened, tongues dancing in a rhythm as old as time. Rebecca slid her hands over his back, clutching him close as desire coiled tight within her.

He shifted, one thigh sliding between hers in a slow, deliberate move. He thrust slowly into her. She gasped at the shock of pain, then pleasure, rocking her hips to test the feel and fullness of him within her.

Camden began to move in a rhythm that quickly had her moaning beneath him as the pleasure built to a new high within her. His lips found hers again as their bodies moved in unison, heat and passion coiling around them.

Camden growled low in his throat, his control fraying around the edges. Rebecca smiled against his mouth, reveling in her power over this magnificent man who had captured her heart.

Each caress brought them closer to the pinnacle, their bodies moving as if they shared one soul. Rebecca threw back her head, helpless to stifle her cries of delight while he lavished kisses over her throat, his hands and body urging her ever higher.

At last, pleasure crashed over them in waves, binding them together in a perfect moment of bliss. She clung to him as the tremors subsided, her heart overflowing with love for the man in her arms.

Replete, he cradled her close, his breaths ragged as he struggled to regain control. He buried his face in her hair, overcome with emotion. Never had he imagined such profound joy and completion.

He lifted his head to gaze into her eyes, darkened with passion and filled with tenderness. “You are my heart, my home, my everything,” he whispered, brushing a stray curl from her cheek. “I shall love you always.”

She smiled, tears shimmering on her lashes. “As you are mine, my love.”

Camden kissed her then, a sweet, lingering kiss full of emotion and promise. He rolled onto his back, gathering her close so she lay half atop him.

Rebecca rested her head on his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart. A profound contentment stole over her, the culmination of a journey that had begun in enmity and ended in love.

Camden stroked Rebecca’s hair, his touch feather-light. A deep sense of contentment suffused him. This was where he was always meant to be. Here in this ancient castle, with the woman who held his heart, he had found peace at long last. He pressed a kiss to her brow, breathing in her scent. She smelled of lavender and desire, an intoxicating combination that stirred his blood. Yet he was content to simply hold her, to listen to her soft breaths and feel the warmth of her skin against his.

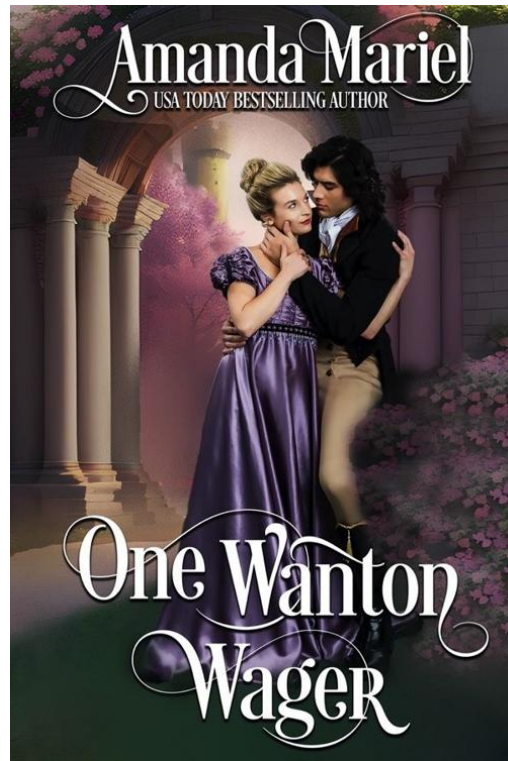
“I can think of no better way to begin our own forever,” she said.

“Nor can I,” he said, nuzzling her neck.

His lips joined with hers, a gentle yet passionate kiss that ignited a fire within her soul and promised a love that would last an eternity. Passion’s lasting promise built on a legacy of love.

In a world where desire ignites with a single touch, Lady Daphne Summerville and the audacious Earl of Bedford, Alex Beauchamp, engage in a daring wager that tests the boundaries of their hearts. As stolen kisses fuel a hidden passion, their game of hearts leads them to a reckoning of love, desire, and the perilous dance between reason and recklessness.

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Chapter 1



Northumberland, summer, 1816

Daphne Sumerville, the widowed Viscountess Gilford, sat opposite her sisters-in-law sipping tea. She lowered her teacup and gave Rebecca and Phoebe a bright smile. Rebecca and Camden had returned to Northumberland yesterday after having departed nearly a year ago and Daphne was thrilled to see her again. She'd missed Rebecca dearly during her absence.

Phoebe, Rebecca's twin, had missed her just as much. Perhaps more, for the moment the sun crested the horizon this morning, she'd rushed over, dragging Daphne in her wake. Not that she would complain, for she, too, had been bursting with excitement at the couple's arrival.

Daphne glanced around the castle's solar before returning her attention to Rebecca. "It's good to have you back, but wouldn't you be more comfortable at your parents' house?"

"Oh, yes, you know you would." Phoebe squealed, her eyes lighting. "You cannot possibly wish to stay here with scarcely any furniture and only a couple of borrowed servants."

Rebecca shook her head then took a sip of her tea. "You well know how much I love Almerly. Besides, I've reconsidered my prior stance and we are renovating."

Daphne could not keep the shock from her expression. Rebecca had been adamant about keeping the castle as a monument to Sir Aristin and Lady Isabel, the last couple to

reside within these walls more than a hundred years prior. “What changed your mind?” she asked, unable to curb her growing curiosity.

“I think Sir Aristin and Lady Isabel brought Camden and I together. Their legacy is strong, their love still flows through the walls and across the landscape of Almerry. They would be pleased to see the castle restored to its prior beauty and brimming with life and love once more.” Rebecca cast a wistful glance around the solar, a small grin pulling at her lips. “This is home.”

“I see your mind is set.” Phoebe’s shoulders slumped, but only for a moment. “It will be a grand castle when you have finished.”

Daphne nodded. “Indeed, and what’s more, I believe you are right. Sir Aristin and Lady Isabel would approve.”

Rebecca’s eyes sparkled with delight as she set her teacup on the table Camden had built when he’d first arrived at Almerry a year ago. “I want the two of you to help me decorate. I’d like to maintain a medieval feel. Do my best to honor their memory as we refurbish.”

“What fun,” Phoebe said. “When do we begin?”

“Camden is in town with his cousin, Alex—”

“The connoisseur of women?” Phoebe gasped.

Daphne nearly choked on her tea. “The what?”

Phoebe gave a mischievous grin. “Rebecca has written to me about him. He’s an earl and enjoys the company of many women. Lord Brunsford prides himself on being a connoisseur of women.” She turned toward Rebecca, “Isn’t that right?”

“Indeed. But he’s truly a kind man. No doubt a rogue, but a rather lovable one if I dare say so.” Rebecca reached for the teapot then poured herself another cup.

Daphne would have to take her word for that because she had no intention of becoming familiar with such a man. She did hope to someday remarry, in fact, she would have to before long. She’d already been a widow for more than three years

and felt exceedingly bad about accepting financial assistance from Lord and Lady Chesterfield. There was Henry to consider as well. Her son would require more as he grew older. Yes, she needed a husband, and soon. However, a rogue would never suit.

“I cannot wait to meet him.” Phoebe flipped open her fan and waved it with flair.

Rebecca reached out, stilling the fan. “He’s been warned to leave you alone.”

“Why?” Phoebe snapped the fan closed and lowered it back to her lap. “I’ve never been in the presence of such a man and was rather looking forward to it.”

“There is your answer, dear sister. A man like him would charm your socks off before you realized the threat his syrupy words held.” Rebecca smiled. “Do stop pouting. I am certain you will have many admirers among the guests at Mother and Father’s annual house party.”

“I doubt that very much. Mother invites the same families every year and it has yet to garner me any serious suitors.” Phoebe bit the inside of her cheek. “I’ve grown weary of waiting. I want to fall in love and start a family of my own.”

Rebecca took her hand, giving a little squeeze. “I know you do, and so you shall.”

“But a rogue would not help you to accomplish that goal,” Daphne added.

Rebecca gave another squeeze before releasing Phoebe’s hand. “You cannot rush love. It finds you when it is ready. She’s right about that.”

“Right about what?” Camden strolled into the solar, going to Rebecca and dropping a kiss on the top of her head.

Daphne’s gaze locked on the tall gentleman who walked in behind him. Mercy, he was handsome. Midnight colored hair brushed his neck and temples. His bright green eyes were framed in dark lashes, and his nose, mouth, and jaw were so well formed they could have been carved from granite.

Her gaze trailed lower, taking in his wide shoulders then following the lines of his toned body down to his tapered waist and muscular thighs. He may be the finest specimen of masculinity she'd ever laid eyes on. It wasn't hard to understand why women threw themselves into his bed.

When she raked her gaze back up his form, his eyes meet hers, a glint of amusement lighting them. She should look away but found herself too captivated to break free. Then he smiled, revealing perfect polished teeth behind a toe-curling rakish grin. She swallowed hard, ripping her gaze from his. Heat flamed across her cheeks.

“Oh, nothing important.” Rebecca waved her hand through the air dismissing the subject. “Tell us, how did you fare in town?”

Daphne turned her attention to Camden, eager to hear what he had to say. Not because she thought his words would interest her so much as because she needed the distraction.

“First, you must introduce me to these lovely creatures.” The rogue stepped closer to Daphne.

“Oh, yes, of course.” Rebecca stood. Phoebe and Daphne did as well.

“Lord Brunsford, may I introduce you to my sister, Lady Phoebe.”

Phoebe dipped a curtsy.

Lord Brunsford bowed before taking her hand and dropping a kiss on her glove-covered knuckles. “Do call me Alex. We are family after all.”

“Indeed.” Phoebe beamed a bright smile. “And you shall call me Phoebe.”

Lord Brunsford turned his attention to Daphne.

Rebecca gave a nod. “And this is my sister-in-law, Daphne Sumerville, Viscountess Gilford.”

The rogue wasted no time taking her hand, his lips lingering far longer than they should before he pulled back to gaze at her. The heat in his eyes caused her stomach to tighten

in a most unsettling way. “Please call me Alex.” His voice, deep and husky, spoke of anything but propriety.

Daphne swallowed past the tightness in her throat, then nodded. She would not use his given name but hadn’t the will to say as much. Regardless, he would soon figure it out. Or better yet, he never would, because she had no intention of spending time in his company.

Rebecca lowered herself back onto the sofa. “Now, do join us and tell me about your trip to town.”

Daphne returned to her chair, grateful that the rogue could not sit beside her. A temporary joy as he quickly came to stand near the chair. But then, she supposed he hadn’t any other choice. The room was sparsely furnished, containing only a sofa, chair, and table. Camden rested his hip on the arm of the sofa near his wife and Phoebe sat beside her. There truly wasn’t anywhere else for Lord Brunsford to dwell.

Nonetheless, she found his nearness unsettling. Determined to scrub the man from her mind, she focused on Camden.

“We were met with some success. Alex managed to hire a handful of laborers to begin work on the castle while I put out inquiries for servants and ordered supplies.” He grinned at Rebecca. “Be sure to leave time in your schedule tomorrow to conduct interviews and select furniture.”

Her eyes sparkled. “I am very much looking forward to the task.”

“I fear it may take most of the day. Potential servants will begin arriving around ten in the morning. Maids, a cook, footmen, and a butler were all inquired after. Of course, if you desire any additional servants, you have leave to hire them.”

Rebecca gazed at Camden, love bursting from within the depths of her eyes. “And what of the tradesmen?”

“They are set to call later in the afternoon. Expect them around five. I fear you will have samples of fabrics and catalogs galore to consider.”

“How splendid. I can scarcely wait.” She glanced from Phoebe to Daphne. “And the two of you will help me. Say you will.”

Rebecca’s excitement was contagious. “It shall be our honor to do so,” Daphne said, excitement blooming within her chest.

“While you ladies are busy with that, Alex and I will be helping the laborers and determining what repairs need to be made,” Camden said.

Drat. Daphne had gotten carried away in Rebecca’s eagerness and forgotten about the rogue who even now stood too close to her. She feared it may be impossible to avoid him. All the same, she would do her best.

What other choice did she have? She slanted her gaze to him, her cheeks warming. The mere sight of him sent her body into a tangle of desire. There was no way she could trust herself in his company.

GET ONE WANTON WAGER

About the Author

Amanda Mariel, an accomplished wordsmith, holds dual master's degrees in liberal arts and education, specializing in the captivating realms of history and literature. Beyond her academic pursuits, she embraces the joyful chaos of motherhood, tending to both her cherished teenagers and her trio of adored fur babies. Among them, a noble Bernese Mountain Dog named Blaze, and two cats of distinct character, Ezra and Puff, share their home.

A USA Today Bestselling luminary, Amanda Mariel conjures vivid tapestries of eras long past, drawing inspiration from the languid cadence of days gone by. With pen poised and imagination unfurled, she traverses the annals of time, weaving tales that illuminate historical landscapes with finesse and flair. Her creative spirit finds respite in reading, traversing new horizons through travel, and capturing moments through the lenses of both her camera and artistic endeavors. Yet, it is in the embrace of family that she finds her truest sanctuary.

To delve deeper into Amanda's captivating world visit to www.amandamariel.com. While there, an invitation to join her newsletter promises a gateway to the latest from Amanda Mariel's literary treasury, and an opportunity to claim a complimentary eBook.

Amanda's passion extends to her readers, welcoming their voices and stories into her narrative realm. Engage with her through email at amanda@amandamariel.com, or connect via her social Media channels.

Amidst the prose and parchment, Amanda Mariel etches a profound connection, bridging eras, hearts, and minds, creating a legacy that resonates through the corridors of time.



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